

A Slip of Luck And Chance

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A Slip of Luck And Chance

by [Wensylilac](#)

Summary

Grian, a veterinarian at heart, was cursed to be a hero. This timeline? His personal purgatory. Powers he never wanted, victories soaked in loss, and a constant parade of faces he failed to save.

The weight of it all crushed his spirit, his dreams of quiet days with animals replaced by endless battles. Love, in this reality, was a luxury he couldn't afford, a tragedy waiting to happen.

Notes

Hello and welcome, everyone! This fanfic is primarily inspired by the number of people who want to see MS! Grian with super power especially the mimick power from Wildlife. This story about Grian with said abilities will demonstrate, why Mitos made the correct decision to leave him powerless. So make yourself comfortable if you planning to keep reading.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

- Inspired by [Midnight Strangers](#) by [Mitos \(SeriouslyCalamitous\)](#)

Chapter 1: There something about you, something buried.

The low-quality webcam cast a stark, unflattering light on Grian, capturing every line etched by regret and every shadow born of self-loathing.

It offered no solace, no judgment, merely a clinical observation of the wreckage he had become. His luxury apartment, a monument to success, felt more like a gilded cage, each expensive piece of furniture a reminder of the hollowness within.

The space was littered with the remnants of a hero's life lived on autopilot: discarded tech, half-eaten takeout containers, and the ever-present weight of a city's expectations.

Grian ran a weary hand through his perpetually disheveled dark blond hair, the locks falling across his forehead, partially obscuring eyes that were once bright with youthful idealism but now held a cold, calculating glint.

He forced a practiced smile as he addressed the camera. "Hey," he greeted, the single word a hollow echo of genuine warmth.

A hero always smiles, even when the weight of the world threatens to crush him. It was a performance he had perfected over the years, a mask he wore so often that it had become a second skin.

He debuted as a hero at twenty-seven, after two years of rigorous training following his recruitment at twenty-five. Now, at thirty-three, the performance felt more like a burden than a duty.

As Grian dropped it, the corners of his mouth twisted into a grimace. "This is the dumbest thing I've ever attempted to do. But perhaps it could be useful. Perhaps, just possibly, if I just... say it out loud, it will just ease the burden." He adjusted the camera angle with a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of a thousand unspoken regrets.

"Entry one," he murmured, his voice a low, melancholic whisper that barely reached the microphone.

He paused, his gaze drifting into the distance, lost in a labyrinth of memories that both haunted and defined him.

"They call me Synapse," he introduced, the name sounding foreign and dissonant on his tongue, even after all these years.

"The Agency's star, the city's hero—a title I wear with mixed feelings. It's a heavy crown, you know, one that's difficult to bear, especially when you know you don't deserve it." A faint, wistful smile touched his lips, quickly fading like a mirage in the desert, a ghost of the innocence he had sacrificed on the altar of power..

"Let's be honest," he continued, his voice taking on a sharper edge.

"I'm good at what I do. Extremely so. But at what cost? What have I become in the process? What have I lost along the way?" He laughed quietly, a hollow sound filled with regret and a profound sense of melancholy.

"Ironically, I never envisioned myself as a hero. I yearned for a simpler, purer life, aspiring to be a veterinarian." A flicker of genuine warmth lit his face as he briefly closed his eyes, a brief respite from the darkness that consumed him.

It had been so long since he had allowed himself to dwell on those days, before the Agency, before the constant scrutiny and the suffocating weight of responsibility.

It had been so long since he had allowed himself to dwell on those days, before the Agency, before the constant scrutiny and the suffocating weight of responsibility.

He was a different person then, a naive, idealistic young man with a genuine desire to heal and comfort. "Picture it," he said, a wistful smile playing on his lips.

"Synapse surrounded by animals, gently tending to their wounds, relieving their pain. Me, in a small, unassuming vet clinic, surrounded by compassion and love for all creatures great and small. Sounds almost ridiculous now, doesn't it?" He paused, a ghostly smile lingering on his lips, a bittersweet reminder of the path he had abandoned.

Grian closed his eyes, allowing himself a fleeting glimpse of a different timeline, a world where things had gone right.

"I was halfway through my veterinary degree," he continued, his voice tinged with a hint of disbelief.

"Can you believe that? All those late nights spent studying, all those grueling exams, all those hours volunteering at the local animal shelter... it all seems so pointless now. Like a dream I can't quite remember."

A dream that had faded into the mists of time, replaced by the harsh, unforgiving reality of his present existence. His eyes snapped open, the light within them extinguished, replaced by a cold, hard glint of pragmatism, a shield against the agonizing pain of what might have been.

"That dream feels like it happened a lifetime ago," he said, his voice devoid of emotion.

"I discovered my gift—or my curse—and it vanished the same day. This, you see, is my curse: the moment I realized I could obtain anything merely by reaching out. I had the power, the strength, the ability, and then I had to choose." His voice cracked, revealing the carefully maintained apathy he usually projected.

"No, that's not true," he corrected himself, his voice laced with self-loathing.

"I made a choice—a terrible, selfish choice. I chose power, the path of least resistance, the path that promised glory and control but delivered only emptiness and self-loathing. I

betrayed everything I believed in, everything I ever wanted to be."

'God, how could I have been so ignorant?'

he reflected bitterly, the question a constant refrain in the back of his mind, a tormenting reminder of the decision that had irrevocably altered his life.

His power manifested relatively late, forcing him to choose between a life dedicated to healing and a power that could make him something more... or something far worse.

He leaned forward, his voice lowering to a self-critical, confessional murmur, as though confessing his transgressions to an unforgiving, silent priest, as though asking for forgiveness for sins he could never atone for.

He said, "It's like a drug, you know," staring off into space in front of the camera.

"The sensation of complete control, reaching out and just having what someone else values, is high like no other. It's completely corrupting and intoxicating."

He paused, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "Worst of all, they never suspect. We have counter people who hide their powers. When I use my ability, they don't realize I've already taken it. They suffer a shock from suddenly losing a part of themselves—something they kept hidden, kept using even without the agency's help. They chalk it up to a bad day, a power surge, or, in the worst-case scenario, they panic, thinking they've lost their abilities altogether. Three minutes of agony and fear..."

He had learned the hard way about the biggest drawback of his power: empathic backlash. He could feel whatever the user whose ability he had stolen was feeling for the entire duration he used their ability.

The first time was an accident; Grian almost drowned in the intensity of it. It happened in class.

He was twenty-five, studying for his veterinary degree, content in his normalcy. Powers usually manifested in the early to late teens, and Grian had shown no signs—until that very day.

A brunette classmate, eager to impress, was showing off his minor ability of fire manipulation. Small flames danced across his palm, flickering with playful energy.

The kid was beaming, reveling in the attention. Grian watched, a strange curiosity bubbling within him.

He couldn't explain it, but something compelled him—an irresistible urge to reach out. Grian didn't understand what he was doing, not at first. It was like a switch flipped in his mind, a newfound awareness of the energy that flowed through the brunet, the power that allowed him to conjure fire from nothing.

Without conscious thought, Grian reached out, his mind grasping, pulling. The flames on the brunette's palm sputtered and died; the kid's smile faltered, replaced by a flicker of confusion. He tried again, focusing his energy, willing the fire to return—nothing. He tried harder, sweat beading on his forehead, frustration building—still nothing.

Then, *panic* set in.

It wasn't a wave, but an explosion. Grian felt a searing, all-consuming inferno of fear—not his own, but the brunette's—amplified and magnified, burning through his veins.

Grian staggered back, clutching his chest, gasping for air, like the air itself has thick ash and fear mixed in it.

The brunette's terror raged like a wildfire, fueled by self-doubt and the acute, agonizing sensation of losing an irreplaceable part of himself.

His ability was his source of joy, value, and uniqueness, now snatched away, leaving a gaping, bleeding wound.

Grian felt the crushing loss, the agonizing fear of being ordinary, useless, and inferior. It was a violation not only of power but also of someone else.

"The light in his eyes faded, replaced by confusion, then despair. He looked utterly lost, broken in a way that haunts my nightmares: a grounded bird with shattered wings, a lifeless puppet with severed strings. I felt a pang of guilt, a flicker of something like remorse—fleeting. The power was too intoxicating, a siren's call; the control, too addictive, a phantom limb; the hunger, too insatiable, a gnawing beast; the need to win, too overwhelming, a tidal wave."

Grian snapped out of the memory—the moment his life twisted irrevocably, the day he crossed the line.

'It was so easy,' Grian thought, the memory a bitter poison, a constant reminder of the monster he became.

An echo of a whisper, his worst traits clinging to him, a suffocating shroud. A reminder of the choice that condemned him to this hell.

'Like breathing, effortless. Like it was meant to be, a twisted destiny. Like I was destined for this, a puppet. Like I had no choice, a lie. But I did have a choice. And I chose wrong.'

The blonde shook his head violently, trying to dislodge the memory, to banish the darkness threatening to consume him. To silence the voices urging him to embrace his nature.

Grian knew those voices weren't external; they were his own, born from the darkness within—a terrifying reminder of the monster he was.

The camera's unblinking eye stared back at him, the lens a dark mirror reflecting a fractured image. Grian wasn't sure who he was seeing: the man he used to be, the hero he was meant to be, or the thing he was in danger of becoming. The lines had blurred, twisted together like strands of corrupted DNA.

"Even as Synapse," he sighed, his voice a low, gravelly murmur that seemed to vibrate with suppressed energy, "I'm not really me—not anymore." He paused, the silence stretching, thick with unspoken truths and buried anxieties.

Grian searched for the right words, the precise combination of syllables that could articulate the fractured reality of his existence, but they remained elusive, trapped behind a wall of fear and self-loathing.

"Synapse—he belongs to the Agency, to my own twisted ambition, to a man I'm not even sure I recognize in the mirror anymore."

Grian ran a hand through his perpetually messy blonde hair, a nervous tic that had become a constant companion. The gesture was meant to project nonchalance, but it only served to highlight the tremor in his fingers, the underlying tension that simmered beneath his carefully constructed facade. "It's like... I'm a puppet—a highly sophisticated, incredibly powerful puppet, but a puppet nonetheless. The Agency pulls the strings, dictating my missions, my public image, crafting the narrative the world consumes. They decide who I fight, what I say, even how I feel. And I let them because I crave validation, power, and control."

His voice dropped, the gravelly murmur deepening into a dangerous growl.

"My ambition fuels the performance, driving me to push the limits of my power, to steal more abilities, to climb higher in the Agency's ranks, to achieve more... more of everything. But the higher I climb, the further I fall away from who I used to be."

He chuckled, a hollow, mirthless sound that echoed in the small, confined space—the sound of a man teetering on the edge of a precipice, fully aware of the abyss that awaited him below.

"The irony—the truly sick and twisted irony—is that Synapse is the only thing I truly own. Grian, the vet student, the normal guy with normal dreams... he's gone, erased the moment I

stole that kid's fire, the moment I tasted that power. I can't go back to that life, not now. There's no going back. I'm an anomaly, a glitch in the system, a walking paradox, like I was created to walk a different path—a path paved with stolen power and the echoes of other people's pain, a path that leads straight to hell."

He shivered, despite the warmth of the room, a primal response to the darkness that swirled within him, a darkness that threatened to engulf him completely.

"And that path... God, that path terrifies me. I'm scared it will consume me, turn me into something unrecognizable, something monstrous—something devoid of humanity."

He shifted in his seat, his gaze drifting to the side, as if he could see the ghosts of his past selves flitting around the edges of the room, mocking him with their innocence and naivety. "Synapse wasn't supposed to be my name," he continued, a flicker of a genuine smile momentarily illuminating his face.

It was a brief, fleeting glimpse of the man he once was, before the darkness took hold. "My best friend, bless his heart, came up with some lame pun about neural connections, about bridging the gap between potential and reality. Honestly, it was better than the names the Agency suggested. *'Wildcard'?* *'The Mimic'?* Please. They have absolutely no sense of style."

The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by a weary sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the world.

"But even then... even with the name I chose, the small act of rebellion, the pathetic attempt to cling to some semblance of individuality... I do enjoy the perks of being the most powerful hero. The awe, the fear—both thrilling and hurtful. People look at me like I'm a god, capable of anything, a savior, a beacon of hope. But they don't see the price I pay, the darkness I carry, the souls I've crushed beneath my feet. They don't see the puppet, dancing on strings they can't even comprehend, a puppet whose strings are slowly tightening, choking the life out of him."

He leaned closer to the camera, his eyes glinting with a strange mixture of defiance, resignation, and a desperate plea for help that he knew would never be answered.

"This is it," he said, his voice barely a whisper, a confession whispered into the void. "This is the first part—the beginning of many truths for the many lies that have consumed my life. This is the first one. There will be more. I have to get it out before it consumes me completely. Maybe one day, long after I'm gone, someone will find these. Maybe one day, someone will understand... or maybe they'll just see me for the monster I am."

Grian reached out, his fingers hovering over the stop button, his hand trembling.

"But probably not."

The screen went black, leaving only the lingering silence and the unsettling feeling that someone, somewhere, was watching.

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The Agency's headquarters, a monolithic spire of burnished chrome and reinforced glass, pierced the city skyline like a spear. Its upper levels, often shrouded in the perpetual haze that clung to the highest altitudes, stood as a testament to raw power and technological supremacy.

Each floor hummed with advanced systems, from its impenetrable sub-levels to the sprawling training grounds hidden within its mid-sections.

Grian materialized from the shadows, a figure draped in purple and silver finery. His high, ruffled collar, embroidered with intricate silver patterns, framed his neck like a macabre halo. The sharp, angular cut of his shoulders added to his predatory silhouette, filling the room with an almost palpable tension.

The deep purple bodice of his suit hinted at hidden mechanisms beneath subtle silver patterns. Long, flowing sleeves of alternating purple and silver fabric cascaded from his elbows, ending in sharp, elongated points that swayed with calculated precision. Tailored, puffy culottes, one leg deep purple, the other vibrant silver, resembled quilted armor, ending above the knee to reveal dark purple leggings that flowed into sleek, silver-tipped boots.

His mask, a masterpiece of silvered wood, split down the middle, was the focal point. One side curved into a grotesque smirk, the other twisted into a chilling frown, a constant reminder of his dual nature.

The smirk promised playful chaos, the frown hinted at darker intentions. His eyes, visible through narrow slits, held a glint both playful and sinister, dominating the space. Thin silver threads emanated from the mask and costume seams, creating the illusion that he was perpetually suspended, a puppet master surveying his domain.

Each silver bell, subtly integrated into the pointed cuffs and collar, chimed with a low, metallic whisper, a chilling accompaniment to his intimidating presence.

Grian, the marionette, the jester, stepped out of the darkness into Madam Watcher's office, his mask hiding any hint of the wary expression beneath. He held the room captive.

"You wanted to see me, Madam?" he asked, his costume emphasizing the intricate relationship between them, yet his tone suggested he was anything but a puppet.

"Ah, Synapse, always ready to come when I call," Madam Watcher crooned, her icy eyes settling on him. In that instant, something shifted.

"This is why you are the most important hero of our agency." Her words, though complimentary, hung in the air, a subtle reminder of who truly held the strings.

Madam Watcher, was a woman of unsettling contradictions. Her frail frame belied the immense power she wielded.

Her aged eyes held a piercing intelligence, reflecting the dim light with an unnatural gleam. She wore a flowing, midnight-blue gown that seemed alive, the fabric whispering secrets only she could hear.

From its sleek, intimidating exterior, Grian knew few would ever suspect the relic-strewn, mahogany-laden office of Madam Watcher existed within. The office was more than a reminder of the organization's deep roots; it was a stage set for secrets and veiled threats.

The air hung thick with unspoken history, each artifact a silent witness to deals made and broken. Grian is one of many people that feels the simmering tension between the Agency and the government, a power struggle barely concealed by polite press conferences.

At its heart lay the Mutant issue. Powers were still a mystery, their emergence seemingly random, yet increasingly concentrated in the sprawling urban centers. The government, wary and mistrustful, sought control.

But Grian knew the Agency held the upper hand, for now. They offered the government a solution, registration and training.

To wield your powers, to be anything more than a pariah, you had to become a hero, a sanctioned weapon. This was the Agency's leverage, their justification for existing.

They turned potential threats into assets, and the government, despite their resentment, couldn't deny the results. The Agency's efficient handling of supervillains, mutants, and even mundane crimes had made them indispensable.

"Grian," Madam Watcher's voice resonated with unyielding authority. "As our agency's most indispensable asset, the threat posed by the Bambozzlers must be neutralized. Permanently." Her gaze was unwavering, a silent command. She knew Grian alone had endured the most brutal encounters with the city's infamous triumvirate.

Apprehending Ringmaster, Eclipse, and Boogeyman was proving catastrophic. Standard agency heroes were utterly outmatched; engagements invariably resulted in severe casualties for anyone lacking Grian's terrifying capabilities.

He was not merely a ranked hero, but the only force capable of confronting the lethal trio, a living deterrent. His ability to strip powers, rendering adversaries inert, was a weapon of unparalleled potency and profound dread.

The agency, however, saw potential. The ingenuity and effort the Bambozzlers poured into their heists suggested a formidable resource, if redirected.

A faction believed these villains, once captured, could be reformed, becoming invaluable assets.

Terra, a former associate, now served as a hero, yet frustratingly claimed ignorance of the Bambozzlers' civilian identities. This precarious stance placed the agency on a razor's edge with the government and various powerful sectors, who unequivocally demanded the Bambozzlers be eliminated, permanently silenced.

They saw no value in rehabilitation, only the eradication of a persistent, destructive force.

The burden of this final confrontation, and the darkness inherent in Grian's power, rested squarely upon him.

This isn't just to end a threat, but to navigate the treacherous political tightrope between capture and execution, potential asset and absolute annihilation.

A heavy silence descended, thick with unspoken expectations. Grian's jaw tightened, the bells on his mask giving a faint, almost mournful chime as he finally spoke.

"I understand the situation, Madam Watcher." His voice was a low rumble, devoid of emotion, a carefully constructed facade.

He had painstakingly cultivated his image as the agency's poster child, clawing his way to every new milestone. He knew the cost of defiance; to lose the agency's backing was to lose everything he had painstakingly built, to fall from grace into an abyss of his own making.

"I have been trying to figure out what exactly to do. I never stopped trying." The words were a promise, a chilling echo of his relentless pursuit, hinting at the extreme lengths he was prepared to go, and the dark path he was now irrevocably committed to walking.

Madam Watcher's stern expression softened, a predatory gleam flickering in her icy blue eyes as the saccharine sweetness of her motherly act descended, a suffocating blanket of false affection.

Even after all these years, Grian couldn't shake the feeling that those eyes saw right through him, that she knew every insecurity, every ambition, every fear that he tried so hard to conceal.

"Very well, you can go now, my boy." The words dripped with a possessive tenderness, a suffocating embrace that promised unwavering support and unspoken demands.

It was a reminder that Synapse was hers, molded and shaped to her will, and his purpose as a hero was to fulfill her orders, no matter the cost.

'Please, just let me leave,' he thought, the endearment sending a shiver of discomfort down his spine.

As he turned, the saccharine sweetness of Madam Watcher's "my boy" curdled in Grian's gut. He needed air, needed the biting wind of the city to scour away the feeling of being dissected under her gaze.

The secrets swirling behind those icy eyes felt less like hidden knowledge and more like a carefully constructed trap.

Grian heard the whispers, of course, the hushed rumors of her ruthless climb to power, a climb paved with the broken careers and shattered wills of those who underestimated her.

A hunger that made his own ambitions feel like petty cravings.

'Get out. Patrol. Breathe,' he mentally commanded, his hand already on the cold metal of the doorknob. Out there, the threats are honest.

A supervillain's punch is preferable to Watcher's motherly concern.

The West District, a maze of secrets and shadows, was where the city's lifeblood flowed through its grimy veins. The pier, a skeletal finger pointing out into the black water, was what lay under the city's surface.

Gangs, smugglers, the desperate, and the dangerous all came here. Grian was unable to locate the same sense of purpose and familiar pull in the agency's impersonal hallways. Tonight he was not a hero playing politics, but a storm on the horizon, a natural force. His frustration had been heightened since his run-in with Watcher, and the West District was a perfect place for his particular kind of chaotic fury. Grian's costume, a mix of dark textiles and glittering purple and silver, was more than just a fanciful look. Subtle bells chimed with a haunting whisper, a planned taunt more than mere ornament.

He embraced the fear his strategy evoked, defying the conventions of heroism. The bells, his hallmark, foreshadowed the horror Grian filled other people. Initially, the costume's noise and appearance were concerns. But everything evolved in just the span of six years.

The sound of the bells acted as a promise, and it became another facet of Grian as well. Furthermore, no matter what level of expertise they were, criminals were unlikely to prevent their forthcoming punishment, or more accurately, the battering.

Although Grian wasn't expecting much excitement, he ended up finding someone predictable: Boogeyman. The villain appeared to be completing some reconnaissance in the pier. He wasn't expecting more than a few thugs, but then, like a creeping nightmare, the Boogeyman arrived. The villain, infamous for his unsettling mastery of invisibility and dangerously unpredictable tactics.

Grian tracked the sound of footsteps. Boogeyman stalked the pier, radiating sinister intent with every move.

Boogeyman was a genuine threat, capable of inflicting serious damage – unless Grian intervened.

"Hey, Timmy," Grian drawled, addressing the seemingly empty air where he knew Boogeyman lurked.

A high-pitched shriek betrayed the villain's carefully constructed facade of menace. Grian lived for these moments, relishing the chance to dismantle the carefully crafted personas of untouchable villains. Most heroes and even the police considered him a loose cannon, but Grian saw it as a necessary edge.

"How!? When did you even know I was here!? I was sure no one was going to notice!?" Boogeyman squealed, his voice modulator cracking under the strain of his terror. Grian chuckled, the sound echoing off the pier's damp pilings.

"Oh, Timmy," he purred, "you really need to up your game. You make this too easy; it's like you're begging me to catch you."

Even with his jester mask obscuring his expression, it was clear to the terrified villain that Grian was grinning like a predator.

"Leave me alone, Synapse. You don't want this fight," Boogeyman snarled, his voice a strained rasp that betrayed the high stakes of his clandestine operation—significant enough to pique Grian's interest beyond mere torment.

"Oh, *Timmy*, I was just going to play with you, but this? This sounds like fun. A hero's gotta do what a hero's gotta do," Grian purred, his voice dripping with playful menace as his eyes gleamed behind the mask, eager to unravel Boogeyman's scheme.

The humid night air clung to the pier, thick with the briny tang of the sea and the cloying scent of decay. From the shimmering distortion that cloaked him, Boogeyman, a predator of shadows, struck first. A fist, struck from fractured air, materialized with lethal speed, aimed directly at Grian's throat.

Years of honed instinct and training ignited, Grian ducked, the displaced air whistling a chilling whisper past his ear. He spun, launching a lightning-fast kick towards where his senses screamed Boogeyman's center of gravity should be, but the villain was already a blur, the kick meeting only the yielding emptiness of the night.

"Still playing hide-and-seek, Timmy?" Grian's voice, a low, mocking chuckle, cut through the oppressive atmosphere.

Boogeyman's response was not in words, but in a silent snarl that seemed to ripple the very air around him, unleashing a whirlwind of impossible strikes. Grian watched Boogeyman and how he moved with unnatural, disorienting speed, the shimmering distortion around him making his form a shifting, untraceable menace.

He was forced into a brutal dance of defense, parrying blows that materialized from nowhere, each impact sending jarring tremors up his arms. Grian retreated, trying to carve out a sliver of distance, but Boogeyman pressed his advantage, the relentless assault threatening to overwhelm him, to shatter his guard.

The punches were relentless, each a tiny close on hitting him.

Grian danced back from another predictable attack, the air shimmering with Boogeyman's pathetic attempt at misdirection.

"Timmy," Grian sighed, the weariness in his voice palpable, "you're as innovative as a broken record. Don't you ever get tired of the same old song and dance?"

He deliberately stumbled, sprawling against a stack of crates. He let out a little nervous laugh, a picture of feigned clumsiness.

'Surely he won't fall for that' Grian thought. Boogeyman, predictably, lunged, drawn in by the perceived weakness like a shark to blood in the water. "Oh, Timmy," Grian clucked, shaking his head with theatrical disappointment. He barely had time to savor the moment before Boogeyman's fist hurtled toward him. Their eyes met, a spark of icy amusement flickering in Grian's depths. "Although, I suppose I should commend your unwavering commitment to mediocrity. You're consistently *underwhelming*."

The words ignited the villain's rage, precisely as Grian intended. Anticipating the next punch aimed for his face, he seized Boogeyman's wrist at the precise moment.

Grian knew he was now locked in a direct, eye-to-eye confrontation with the invisible menace. "Got you" He sneered at him behind his painted mask. The power surge was almost...anticlimactic. He had done this so often, it was practically an involuntary reflex now.

The empathic backlash still clawed, a wave of negativity threatening to drown him, but he'd learned to relish the chaos, to use it as a source of twisted power.

The invisibility dissolved, revealing Boogeyman: a blond-haired man whose attire was a flamboyant clash of colors and textures, exuding a theatrical charm.

Boogeyman sported a burgundy vest with gold accents and suspenders, adding a touch of elegance. A teal bow tie provided a vibrant contrast against the darker hues. Maroon gloves completed the somewhat sophisticated ensemble. A black hat with a teal ribbon sat atop his head, and a gas mask with pulsing red and blue lights concealed his face as he spoke through the voice modulator.

"You—" Boogeyman roared.

Grian almost snorted, seriously, the look on their faces never got old.

First, it was the "wait, what?" face, followed by the "oh crap, I'm powerless" face. Then came the sputtering rage, the impotent fury. Three whole minutes of it, all thanks to Grian's little "borrowing" habit. Honestly, you'd think they'd learn to protect their powers better.

Amateurs.

Grian grinned, a predatory glint in his eyes. "*Well*, Timmy," he purred, his voice now echoing from seemingly nowhere, "looks like the tables have turned, haven't they?" He activated the stolen invisibility, relishing the flicker of panic that crossed Boogeyman's face.

"Boo!" he whispered, materializing briefly behind the villain before vanishing again.

"Looking for something, Timmy?" Grian's voice taunted, now coming from above. He was perched on a nearby crate, completely invisible.

"You know, Timmy," he said, his voice dripping with false sympathy, "I'm almost feeling bad for you. *Almost*. This is just too much fun." He vanished again, leaving Boogeyman spinning in circles, a frustrated roar building in his throat.

"Let's play a game," Grian's voice echoed, bouncing off the walls. "It's called '*Find the Hero*,' you have three minutes. Well less than three minutes." He paused, then a mischievous glint sparked in his eyes. With a final, silent flourish, Grian was gone. Not just invisible, but gone.

No lingering presence, no mocking echoes, just...nothing. He'd left Boogeyman not with a fight, but with a void. A taste of his own medicine, served cold and dripping with condescension.

Chapter 2: New changes, old grudges.

Grian's voice, a rough rasp of exhaustion and simmering anger, announced, "Tape number three." His jester hero suit, once a proud symbol, was now a tattered insult, a testament to a battle he clearly hadn't wanted. A flash of resentment tightened his features as he glared at the camera, his eyes burning with weary fury. Grian flicked a dismissive glance at the crude bandages plastered to his side, the crimson stain spreading like a taunt, a constant reminder of the price he'd paid. The makeshift bandage offered little more than a stifling pressure, a pathetic attempt to contain the damage.

Each shallow, ragged breath sent fresh agony through him, a cruel reminder of his own stupidity. He'd ignored the doctors' warnings, pushed himself past the breaking point, and now the stitches had given way, a testament to his reckless pride. "If anyone's actually watching this," he began, his voice laced with bitter self-awareness, cutting off a groan, "and wondering why I look like hammered dog crap, it's because I had a run-in with the trio—the self-proclaimed 'bamboozlers.'" A spark of raw fury flashed in his eyes. "Specifically, during their little 'heist' at the Capital Bank. And I swear," he spat, his voice hardening into a promise, "Boogeyman is going to regret the day he ever crossed me. Mark. My. Words."

"He's a dead man walking. I swear it." His hand clenched into a fist, the memory of the fight replaying in his mind: Eclipse's spear, that damned, billowing sleeve snagging on the blade, Boogeyman seizing the opportunity to stab Grian in his side and his back.

"That's it," he growled, "after I'm through with them, this ridiculous thing is going up in flames." Suddenly, a burst of static erupted from the recording, the image flickering violently. Grian's face contorted in a silent scream as the screen dissolved into a chaotic mess of digital snow.

The audio warped, his final words twisting into a garbled, unintelligible mess before cutting off abruptly, leaving only the hiss of corrupted data.

.

When he isn't on duty as Synapse, Grian finds solace at his friend's vet clinic, a stark contrast to his high-stakes hero life. The secrecy surrounding Synapse's identity is paramount, a shield

protecting both Grian and those he holds dear. Only one person outside of official businesses with heroism knows that the mild-mannered Grian and Synapse are one and the same: his best friend, Mumbo.

This close bond is no surprise, considering Mumbo was the mastermind behind the hero name "Synapse," a testament to his penchant for terrible puns. Their friendship blossomed in college, a time when Grian was still charting a course toward veterinary medicine himself. Those were simpler days, before extraordinary abilities complicated his life, but the bond with Mumbo remains his anchor. Mumbo, bless his perpetually calm soul, was supposed to be Grian's anchor, the voice of reason whispering sweet nothings of sanity into his chaos-addled brain. Mumbo was supposed to be the guy who stopped him from, you know, accidentally setting his apartment building on fire while trying to make toast.

But right now, as Grian attempted to become one with the breakroom's questionable plastic furniture, Mumbo's stare felt less like an anchor and more like a lead weight tied to his already sinking mood. He was just about to commune with his "lovely" homemade energy drink – a shimmering concoction that probably violated several laws of physics and possibly the Geneva Convention.

When Mumbo's voice, dripping with concern (or was it amusement? Hard to tell with Mumbo), sliced through the air.

"Grian," he said, with the gravitas usually reserved for announcing the end of the world, "you look...dead. Like, reanimated-corpse-searching-for-brains dead." Grian nearly spat out his precious, potentially radioactive brew.

He leveled Mumbo with a glare that could curdle milk. For someone who struggled profoundly with social interaction, his friend certainly possessed a knack for words that could expertly grate on one's last nerve.

This "energy drink," lovingly and haphazardly crafted from the dregs of at least four different energy drinks, a generous helping of cold brew coffee, an alarming amount of protein powder, and, according to the ever-dubious Skizz, a dash of something that might or might not be classified as a controlled substance, was his lifeline. It may not have been a culinary masterpiece, but it worked its peculiar magic, sustaining him through long shifts at the vet clinic and even longer nights patrolling the city as Synapse. Mumbo and Skizz had even gone

so far as to christen it "Grian's Fourteen-Hour Energy Drink: Health Hazard in a Cup." Clearly, the name wasn't merely for show. And it was equally clear that Mumbo's bedside manner required a serious and immediate overhaul.

"You really need a break, Grian. You look like you'd shatter into a million tiny pieces if I so much as poked you," Mumbo declared, slowly approaching

"I told you, I'm fine. Really, nothing to worry about," Grian insisted, attempting to sound convincing. He wasn't so sleep-deprived that it was a cause for alarm; this was hardly new territory. "I just need a quick energy boost, and I'll be back to my old self."

Grian sometimes overlooked just how much of a worrywart Mumbo could be, a surprising contrast to their usual roles, especially considering Mumbo's struggles with social interaction. Even a simple one-on-one conversation with a pet owner could send the man spiraling into an early grave. That's precisely why Skizz had offered no objections when Mumbo proposed getting Grian a job as a vet tech in the clinic.

"I know you love being around the clinic. Maybe this way, you can still help these little fellas. Being a tech and a vet aren't that different, anyways," Mumbo had said, his voice laced with an uncharacteristic earnestness, when he'd offered Grian the position as a convenient cover for his actual, high-stakes profession.

Grian couldn't even stay mad. Mumbo was, despite his bluntness, a genuinely great man – supportive, insightful, and the perfect counterbalance to Grian's often chaotic personality. "I'm fine, honestly. Just had a rough night, but I'm already good," Grian insisted, gesturing vaguely towards his mug. Mumbo responded with that familiar expression of questionable concern, his eyebrows furrowed in a way that suggested deep skepticism about Grian's definition of "good."

He knew that look. It was the same look Mumbo gave the most...unconventional pet owners who brought in their exotic, often poorly understood, companions.

He was clearly categorizing Grian's current state right alongside a chameleon with a cold or a parrot with an existential crisis.

Despite Mumbo's skepticism, Grian genuinely valued his vet tech role.

The clinic was a sanctuary, a world away from the city's demands and the pressures of being Synapse. Here, he was simply Grian, the guy who could charm the grumpiest cat or expertly bandage a bird's wing. He found satisfaction in the routine: sterilizing instruments, preparing vaccines, comforting anxious owners.

Nursing a sick animal back to health offered a tangible reward, far more immediate than foiling a supervillain's scheme. In those moments, he forgot he was considered the city's top superhero, momentarily shedding the weight of his heroic deeds and agency obligations.

Mumbo fidgeted slightly, his brow furrowed with concern.

"That doesn't exactly reassure me, Grian. I know things are difficult right now, but you don't have to shoulder everything alone. Skizz and I, well, we're here for you, mate," he said softly, his voice a touch awkward but filled with genuine care. Mumbo reached out, hesitating for a moment before gently patting Grian's arm. "We can figure this out together. No need to burn yourself out completely."

Grian sighed, a small smile tugging at his lips. Maybe he didn't always have to be the strong one. "Alright, alright," he conceded, leaning slightly towards Mumbo. "Maybe a little help wouldn't hurt. Thanks, Mumbo."

Grian's eyes flicked to the break room clock; ten minutes until Mumbo's surgery on a geriatric feline. A mischievous glint sparked in his eyes.

"Trying to ditch work, Mumbo?" He teased, knowing full well that Mumbo, for all his veterinary genius, was a disaster when confronted with a hyper-emotional pet owner. The man was a brilliant surgeon, but a terrible hand-holder. "What? Unlike Skizz, I actually do my job," Mumbo retorted, bristling at the *slander*.

"I just prefer not being interrogated every five seconds, which, might I add, is a Skizz specialty."

Grian chuckled, picturing Skizz's legendary disappearing acts whenever the vet techs actually needed him. "Sure, buddy. Sure," he muttered, taking a sip of his drink. "Maybe you should handle post-op for a change," Mumbo shot back, a glint of wicked amusement in his eyes. "Let's see how long you last with Mrs. Periwinkle and her precious Sir Reginald Fluffington the Third." Grian visibly recoiled.

"Okay, okay, *you win*," he conceded, his usual laid-back facade momentarily crumbling. "Just get to the OR before Mrs. Periwinkle starts writing a tragic ballad about Sir Reginald's '*near-death*' experience."

Mumbo nodded, his smirk fading as he grabbed his scrub cap. "Don't overdo it," he said, pausing at the door. Grian waved him off, already reaching for a stack of patient files. But as Mumbo left, Grian could feel the familiar weight of their unspoken conversation hanging in the air—the one about how he was working himself to the bone, how his superhero duties and clinic shifts were leaving him running on fumes. Grian knew Mumbo was right, but old habits die hard. Avoiding the talk was easier than admitting he was burning out.

Grian spent the morning juggling routine blood work, vaccinations, and a litter of squirming kittens who needed deworming. He kept an eye on the walk-in desk. "Hey there buddy, you look like you've been through the wringer. You okay?" Skizz asked, his voice warm with concern.

Grian nodded, though his tired eyes betrayed him.

Skizz, the clinic's senior vet, was impossible to miss in his scrubs, neon yellow, bright as a highlighter, and covered in a chaotic pattern of cartoon ducks. Grian rolled his eyes affectionately; Skizz's fashion choices were legendary, but they were part of what made him family. "Just... wrapping up some scheduled checks," Grian mumbled, his gaze flicking toward Room 4. He knew Skizz was supposed to be treating a senior Persian cat with a UTI there.

As a vet tech, Grian hated when the vets slacked, even if it was Skizz. Especially if it was Skizz. "You're supposed to be in Room 4, y'know."

Skizz dry-chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. "C'mon, you can't blame a guy for taking five. Besides, Mumbo mentioned you've been burning the candle at both ends again." Grian's jaw tightened. Of course Mumbo would tattletale. His best friend couldn't spill Grian's secret identity as Synapse, the city's top hero, but he could weaponize Skizz's fatherly instincts.

"Skizz, as much as I love that you're here prying into my life, really it's touching, you need to check on the senior cat," Grian said, his voice laced with exhaustion but softened by a faint smile. Skizz didn't give a reply but nodded off he goes, Grian scoffed fondly but the hours were getting on him, maybe Mumbo was right. He needs to rest for a bit.

Grian's fingers hovered over the clinic's time clock at 2:57 PM, the plastic digits glowing faintly in the dim break room. He'd skipped lunch again.

No one needed to know that. Or maybe they always knew.

"See you tomorrow, G!" called Skizz, as he grabbed his jacket. He waved, forcing a smile, but his mind was already elsewhere. The "real work" started now: trading scrubs for a hero suit, swapping stethoscopes for a utility belt.

Being a superhero wasn't glamorous, it was late nights, missed birthdays, and the constant fear of letting someone down. Grian stepped into the Agency, his gaze immediately locking on the finished suit tailored for his Synapse persona. His old costume had been a constant hindrance in fights—sleeves too long, a fantasy-inspired design that looked stunning but proved impractical when facing multiple opponents.

The new suit reimagined his classic original jester aesthetic with functional flair.

A bold, multi-pointed ruffled collar encircled his neck, each tip dangling a tiny bell that jingled softly, blending playfulness with an eerie edge. Beneath it, a fitted diamond-patterned top clung to his frame, layered over a black shirt whose chest peeked through the wide, open collar, drawing the eye.

The sleeves were voluminous and gathered at the wrists, where matching ruffled cuffs echoed the collar's design. Below, tight leggings hugged his slender legs, their hemline finished with pointed scallops that mirrored the collar's sharp angles.

The color palette remained faithful to his signature: sleek silver and rich, varying shades of purple, tying the new look to his roots while ensuring every detail served a purpose in battle.

Grian ran a hand over the fabric, a faint smile playing on his lips. This suit wasn't just armor—it was a declaration. For *nearly seven years*, his old suit had been his uniform, a jester's motley that had become his trademark, a signal to the world of who the agency wanted him to be. But this new one? It stripped away the whimsy, revealing the sharp, unyielding menace at Synapse's core.

"This is perfect," he murmured, tracing the sleek lines. A new era dawned for Synapse—not just the city's hero, but something more than the agency's golden boy. "I hope it meets your expectations," came a voice. Grian turned to see Xisuma, head of the suit department, his expression warm with quiet pride.

"I focused on practicality, but I kept the details that make it you."

"Thanks, X," Grian said, genuine gratitude in his tone. Xisuma had risked his position to help him rewrite his image, to break free from the impractical design that was just too ridiculous to be kept as design.

His finger traced the suit's material and smiled, he felt relieved, The agency might have built him, but this? This was his choice. And Synapse was ready to show the world who he really was.

"It's the least I can do, I enjoyed making it anyway," Xisuma assured him, which made Grian feel a little less guilty for almost getting Xisuma removed from his position. "You know how much of an eyesore your original suit was? God, I'm relieved you decided to ditch it altogether," Xisuma said, stepping closer to the new suit.

Grian let out a cackle; at least someone in the main operations team was agreeable.

“Want me to explain the new details? I kept the jester design but made it less like you’re a joke,” Xisuma continued. Grian’s eyes wandered the lab, landing on other equipment on the table.

His hand reached for the hilt of a sword. With almost a sixth sense, Xisuma snatched his hand. “G, I suggest you don’t do that,” he begged, fear clear in his voice.

“Why?” Grian asked, amusement barely hidden. He couldn’t help it, seeing terror in his friend’s eyes was too tempting.

“What does it do?” Xisuma’s grip tightened, as if holding on long enough would make Grian give up.

“You won’t tell me?” Grian whined. It looked interesting—like a sword hilt, but...

“Because the interns worked really hard on that. If you somehow broke it...” Xisuma’s voice softened, almost gentle.

“You’re making a big fuss—I won’t break it!” Grian huffed, offended by the reasonable concern. It was true he’d destroyed plenty of equipment (and the lab) over his career, there was a reason he rarely visited.

Or needed to be accompanied by someone.

“C’mon, I’m not that *bad!*” he grumbled. He let go of the equipment, watching Xisuma move it out of reach.

"Sometimes it feels like I'm a toddler. I'm thirty-three, I know how to handle equipment!" Grian scoffed, but there was no real bite in it.

"Anyway," Grian muttered, shifting uncomfortably, "just tell me about the damn suit."

Xisuma's lips quivered into a smile, a familiar chuckle bubbling up at the hero's perpetual grumbling. "You know," Xisuma teased, his voice laced with amusement, "most people past thirty don't require constant baby-sitting when it comes to handling advanced tech. You're practically a walking disaster zone, Grian."

"Well, well, look who it is," a voice chirped from behind them.

Grian and Xisuma turned to find a familiar figure approaching: Gem, the ginger-haired heroine known to the public as Slayer.

"Just the people I wanted to see, hello," she greeted.

"Hi, Gem," Grian and Xisuma greeted in unison, acknowledging the youngest member of the agency's top-ranked heroes.

"I heard Grian finally ditched his old suit," she remarked, gesturing towards the mannequin.

"I'm guessing that's the new one?" Xisuma confirmed with a nod.

"So, are you going to try it on? Come on!" Gem urged, nudging Grian forward. "Right now?" he responded, surprised. He hadn't really planned on wearing the new suit so soon.

"Well, yeah! What, were you just planning on admiring it from afar? Come on, go try it on!" Gem teased. Xisuma just shrugged, chiming in, "I don't see any problem with it. Plus, I want to make sure we don't need to make any tweaks."

"Come on, let's see it!" Gem urged, her excitement palpable. Grian groaned, not planning to do it now, but seeing Gem's enthusiasm, he relented with a nod.

After a flurry of activity and Gem's expert help, the suit was finally on in just ten minutes. Every seam aligned, every contour perfect.

"You look incredible!" Gem exclaimed, her ginger hair practically vibrating with excitement.

"I loved the old suit, but this one? This is next-level menacing!" Grian's answering chuckle was warm, a stark contrast to the imposing figure he was becoming. Xisuma presented the mask, its familiar half-smirk, half-ghastly frown, a chilling sight.

"Here," he said simply, the weight of the mask's history evident in his tone. Gem circled Grian, her eyes alight with inspiration. "Definitely slick your hair back," she declared, nodding decisively.

"It's the only way to truly complete the look." She gestured, imagining the medium-length strands neatly swept back, revealing the sharp angles of his face and enhancing the suit's formidable presence. "It'll add that final touch of...untouchable."

"Untouchable?" Grian echoed, the word catching in his throat. It was a concept he'd never truly considered, not when his own vulnerability was etched into his skin.

His fingers instinctively traced the faint outline of the scars marring his left side, a silent testament to Bamboozler's cruel victory. The ugly reminders served as a constant echo of that day, a stark contrast to the image of invincibility the suit was meant to project.

"Yeah, sure," Grian huffed, the nonchalant tone a flimsy mask over the turmoil beneath. Gem's bright expression faltered, a flicker of concern crossing her features as she noticed Grian's subtle gesture. She knew the history behind those scars, the pain and violation they represented. Her voice softened, "Grian, I didn't mean..." she trailed off, searching for the right words.

Before Gem could fully apologize, a piercing alarm blared through the room, cutting her off. Red lights flashed, painting the walls with frantic urgency. A stern, synthesized voice echoed,

"Attention citizens, citywide lockdown in effect. Multiple supervillain engagements confirmed. Seek shelter immediately. All available heroes are responding."

The air crackled with tension. Xisuma swore, his fingers flying across his tech, already strategizing.

Gem's eyes darted around, a mix of dread and grim determination hardening her features. She pivoted towards Grian, her voice laced with a nervous energy.

"Fuck," Gem hissed, her gaze fixed on the suit, now a symbol of both protection and immediate danger. "Guess you're breaking it in tonight?" Grian stood frozen for a beat, the weight of the moment crashing down on him. The scars on his side seemed to throb in response to the alarm.

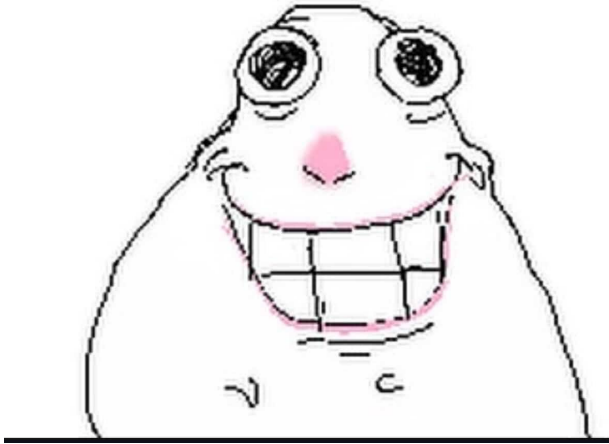
He glanced down at the suit, then back at Gem, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. He took a deep breath, the nonchalance gone, replaced by a grim resolve. A slow smirk spread across his face. "Guess so," he said, his voice low and steady. "Time to see what this thing can do."

[The suit](#)

Chapter 3: Dancing mockery

Chapter Notes

if you read or seen this updated, no you didn't that was just a dream.



The sky was alive with alarm sirens, a frightening symphony of close disaster. As heavy rain began to pour down, red flashing lights pulsed around the city, bathing the streets with a horrible shine.

Grian felt the frantic atmosphere of the city like a blow to his body as he stood atop the Agency's headquarters.

Northside. Detonation. villainous activity of high priority.

"Bamboozlers," Grian groaned, clenching his teeth.

He recognized their characteristic, anarchy, theatrics, and a total disdain of ordinary life, so he needed no confirmation.

"I'll check on Daybreaker, Eclipse is giving her a headache," Gem said, glaring at him and telling him to "try not to get hurt." Grian nodded as he saw the younger heroine pass him.

His comm crackled into Watcher's private channel. She doesn't sound pleased at all.
"Synapse, report."

"Bamboozlers attempted a heist," he said in a rapid voice. "Vault compromised."

"Of course, I know that," Watcher replied in an impassive manner. "Belonging to Mr. Keeper." It seemed like Keeper had already thrown a fit about it. The question of who the con artists stole from, however, was also concerning.

Grian's stomach knotted. *Keeper. Secret Keeper Corp.* That wasn't simply information; it was a potential disaster.

"Content?"

"Project Warden," Watcher stated, the name a chilling echo. "They have Warden."

Grian's thoughts raced. Warden, he had assisted in burying that weapon proposal from Keeper. Deadly weapon meant not to just injure but also deal the killing blow.

"Warden," he said again, hissing quietly. "Why is a proposal like that put in a USB, in the least guarded facility in the entire city? And why was it so ridiculously effortless for people to grab?"

Watcher rasped, "Irrelevant," in a frigid tone. "Retrieve it, Synapse. Discretion is paramount."

"Watcher, the Gs—"

The call ended abruptly because he had his orders now, "What a bitch" he muttered, Grian hated that old crone so much. Because he got it. No one, can have those plans, no one should even know about it. Both the risk and the consequences were too great. With a chilling fear settling in his bones, he cut the connection.

Beside him, Joel arrived with a concerned look on his face. "Synapse, what's really going on?"

Grian hesitated. How much could he trust Joel with? How much could he trust anyone in this mess? "Bamboozlers stole something from Keeper Corp," he said, carefully choosing his words.

"Watcher wants it back. Now."

Joel's eyes narrowed, his hand instinctively going to his sword hilt. "Then let's move," he said, his voice tight.

Grian met his gaze, a silent plea for trust. He couldn't tell Joel the truth, not yet. "Go. I'll be right behind you."

Joel hesitated, then nodded, disappearing into the rain-swept streets. Grian clenched his fist,

his mind racing. Grian himself had been tempted to utilize those weapon models, and the Gs had undoubtedly been interested in the proposal.

He questioned whether the three people who took the drive were aware of its contents or if it was just bad luck. He launched himself off the roof, Discord humming in his grip.

Discord, is palm-sized, cast in dull iron with a weathered bronze patina, its surface scored with faint spiral grooves. A slit runs down one side, from which a small iron clapper peeks—when struck, it lets out a sharp, rattling chime. Tucked into a reinforced loop at the top is a thin, silvery cord: woven from metal filaments, it can slice through fabric and light armor when snapped taut, or wrap around limbs to restrain. The same cord is strong enough to anchor the bell to ledges or window sills, letting Grian swing between city buildings with quick, rhythmic tugs.

Look ridiculous but it makes sense, since he is a jester themed hero. He dived headfirst into a conspiracy, and he had a feeling he was about to walk through hell.

But he had to stop the Bamboozlers, contain Warden, and find out who was pulling the strings, even if it meant exposing the darkest secrets of the Agency itself. He had a city to save, and a truth to uncover. The coordinates had been spot on. Grian dropped onto the rain-slicked rooftop, Discord singing in his hand, and there he was. Ringmaster. "Well, hello there, darling, isn't this a sight?" The voice, distorted by the gas mask's modulator, oozed a saccharine sweetness that made Grian's teeth grind.

"Or should I say, you're the sight I wanted to see tonight."

"Ringmaster," Grian spat, his grip tightening on Discord. Even behind the grotesque carnival mask, he could feel Ringmaster's gaze, far too knowing, far too... interested.

He wasn't sure what infuriated him more: the chaos Ringmaster unleashed, or this unsettling, theatrical flirtation. Ringmaster gestured around the rooftop, a flourish worthy of a stage. He was dressed like a demented carnival barker, a garish patchwork of Teal and wine red and somehow made the gas mask even more disturbing.

"Such a romantic setting, wouldn't you agree? Rain, sirens, the threat of imminent doom... It's simply divine."

"Where's the drive?" Grian demanded, cutting through the theatrics. "I know you have it."

Ringmaster chuckled, a dry, rasping sound.

"The drive, you say? Is it really that big of a deal?." He tapped a gloved finger against his temple.

"We may or may not have acquired a certain USB drive. But tell me, darling, why is the Agency so desperate to get it back? What secrets are you hiding?"

Grian's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't concern you. Just hand it over." The gas mask's lights glowed like warm amber as Ringmaster cocked his head, his gaze tracing the line of Grian's mask with unnerving focus. "Oh, but it does, Angel. We Bamboozlers live for unveiling secrets, and the Agency's closet is stuffed with skeletons...just like the one you're hiding behind that grinning mask of yours, hm?" His voice dropped to a low purr.

"This little drive... it's the key, isn't it? A key to something earth-shattering."

Grian's breath hitched; words died in his throat before they could form. He let out a rough, ragged growl, his eyes locked on Ringmaster's masked face, searching for the USB, yes, but also for the flicker of heat he swore he saw behind the lens. His silence stretched, thick and charged, and Ringmaster took a slow, deliberate step closer, close enough that Grian could smell the faint, sharp scent of his cologne.

"Exactly why so silent, Mr. Perfect Hero? Can't say a thing to defend your precious agency?" Then his gaze drifted down Grian's frame, and a playful edge crept into his voice that made Grian's skin prickle

"Is this a new suit? You look quite dashing, finally something that doesn't make you look like a clown hired for a kid's birthday. Though I'll admit, even as a clown, you'd be the prettiest one in the room."

The words landed like a soft touch and a sharp kick all at once. Grian's jaw tightened until it ached; every instinct screamed to pin the man against the wall, to beat him to bits and watch him bleed beneath his hands, a thought that sent a jolt of heat through him that had nothing to do with anger. He couldn't afford to get lost in it, though: stalling meant waiting for backup to cut them off, but the idea of another hero stepping between them made his blood boil.

This secret needed to be buried deep, burned to ash, and so did this dangerous pull that tugged him toward the very criminal he was supposed to stop. Watcher would tear him apart if the Bamboozler got away with the heist.

The air thrummed with a charge that was half violence, half vertigo as Grian's gaze raked over Ringmaster's form, the sharp line of his jaw, the way his coat clung to broad shoulders.

'No more games,' he hissed inwardly, and for the first time, let his power unfurl like a dark ribbon.

It latched onto Ringmaster's ability with greedy precision, copying it so perfectly it felt less like theft and more like a kiss, and in that same instant, he felt the other man's emotions wash over him: thrill, and a tiny, coiling thread of rage. With a single, brutal gesture, he sent the man crashing into the rooftop exit wall. Stone spiderwebbed, and Ringmaster's breath hitched in a sound that was almost beautiful.

"*Enough playing,*" Grian growled, his voice low enough to feel more than hear, each word

dripping with heat and threat — and under it all, the echo of Ringmaster's thrill thrumming in his own veins.

"Tell me about the drive. If you have it, where is it?" He pounced, his fist aimed for Ringmaster's ribs, but the other man twisted away with impossible grace, his hand brushing Grian's cheek in passing — a touch that burned like a brand, and amplified that flicker of shared rage. Now Ringmaster was fighting back in earnest: their bodies collided, grappling close enough to taste each other's sweat and rage, fists finding flesh with sickening thuds while their eyes never left each other's.

Every parry felt like a caress, every blow a confession — two predators dancing on the edge of death, their emotions tangled as tightly as their bodies, and neither could look away.

"God, you sure pack a punch. Or should I say *I do* it is my power you are using, Darling playing dirty, staring me down like that before you stole my power." Ringmaster's voice purred through the chaos, a coo that sent a jolt up Grian's spine despite himself. Even with the gas mask shielding his mouth and half his jaw, Grian could see that stupid, lopsided grin in the crinkle of his eyes, the same eyes he'd been holding with his own just moments before, that intense lock that had felt less like a challenge and more like a dare.

It hit Grian then, sharp and sudden: he'd almost forgotten. His ability didn't just copy ,it blocked the original user from accessing their power for three full minutes.

And Ringmaster knew that. The realization barely had time to land before the man's hand flashed to his hip, drawing a pistol with a fluidity that made Grian's breath catch. Thank god for the jester mask that covered his entire face, last time they'd faced off, Ringmaster had been weaponless. The shock that jolted through Grian would have been plain as day on his face otherwise.

Instead, he just stood his ground, his gaze narrowing behind the painted fabric as he took in the gun.

"Do you like it?" Ringmaster trilled, twirling the weapon in his fingers so the light caught its polished surface. "Got 'em customized to match my outfit." And it was true, the silver filigree curled around the barrel like carnival decorations, the handle inlaid with deep magenta velvet that mirrored the trim of his coat. It was beautiful. It was deadly. It was so him that Grian felt a strange flip in his stomach, even as he tensed for the shot.

"Shall we tango?" Ringmaster purred, and the words were barely out of his mouth before he squeezed the trigger. The shot cracked through the rooftop air, and Grian threw himself sideways, he hissed hitting his side hard, as he slammed against the wall.

"Fucking hell," he growled, his voice rough with frustration and something else he didn't

want to name. His eyes darted to the small watch on his wrist, then back to Ringmaster, who was already aiming the second pistol, twin pieces of deadly carnival art in his hands.

Two minutes left. In two minutes, Ringmaster's powers would flood back, and Grian would be outmatched. Retreat would be the only way out, but the thought of turning his back on this man, with his grinning eyes and his painted death machines, made his jaw clench so tight it hurt. Ringmaster fired again, and this time Grian didn't just dodge, he lunged forward, closing the gap between them in three long strides. *'Do something, I need to to do something.'*

The bullet whizzed past his ear, hot enough to singe the hair on his neck, but he was already on top of the other man, their bodies crashing together against the exit wall.

The guns pressed against his chest, cold and hard, one pull on the trigger he would have bullets holes in him.

It didn't matter because Ringmaster's gaze was more hurtful to feel, how it's locked on his mask, on the eyes behind it, and in that moment, the tango didn't feel like a fight. It felt like a dance they'd been practicing their whole lives.

“Synapse!”

The call cut through the roar of their struggle, and Grian's head snapped up — in the distance, perched on the adjacent rooftop, was Gem , her crowbow drawn and already losing an arrow.

It whistled through the air, aimed not to kill but to distract, and Ringmaster twisted away at the last second, the bolt embedding itself in the wall beside his head with a sharp thunk.

A wave of relief washed over Grian, hot and sharp, but it was tangled with something heavier, disappointment that curdled in his stomach.

“Well, we'll see each other again, darling,” Ringmaster purred, his voice low enough only Grian could hear.

His eyes held Grian's for one last, searing moment, a look that was clear taunt before he took a step back, his boots finding the edge of the rooftop.

Grian's hand twitched, as if to reach for him, but he held still.

He didn't want this to end, not like this, not before he'd gotten the drive, not before he'd

figured out the pull that pulled him toward this man even as they tried to hurt each other. But he couldn't stop it as Ringmaster leaned back and fell, careless and confident, into the darkness below, no scream, no hesitation, just the sight of his coat flaring out like a black parachute before it vanished from view.

Gem was at his side in seconds, but Grian barely heard her asking if he was hurt.

He stared at the empty edge of the roof, upset not just about the missing drive, but about the cold space where Ringmaster had been. A sickening feeling settled in his chest, he'd known, deep down, that the supervillain had played him like a fiddle this whole time. Every glance, every parry, every word had been part of the game. And Grian had fallen for it. Hard.

"He didn't have it," Grian growled, his voice low and bitter as he stared at the rooftop edge. "He made sure I wasn't there for it."

Gem stepped beside him, her crowbow already slung over her shoulder.

"That's what we're seeing," she said, her tone quiet but sharp.

"Neither Eclipse nor Ringmaster had the drive, it was Boogeyman this whole time."

The pieces clicked into place with a sickening click. They'd planned it all: two villains drawing the heroes' fire, making enough chaos and damage that no one would spare a glance for the third, the one with the power to turn invisible, slipping through their fingers while Grian was busy dancing with Ringmaster on the roof.

They'd split the attention, split the fight, and walked away with exactly what they'd come for. And Ringmaster, had known Boogeyman wouldn't stand a chance against Grian. So he'd made sure Grian was too focused on him to even think about looking elsewhere. Grian's hand clenched at his side, the pain from his grazed thigh throbbing in time with his pulse.

All that time, all that tension, it had been a distraction. A beautiful, deadly, intentional distraction.

"You're injured," the ginger said, and he felt her hand squeeze his shoulder gently, a touch of comfort that felt foreign right then.

"Let's get you back to HQ." He nodded, but his eyes were still fixed on the darkness below. Even now, knowing he'd been played, he couldn't shake the feeling of Ringmaster's gaze on him, or the quiet thrill that came with the promise of seeing him again.

When Grian walked back into the agency with Gem at his side, the tension hit him like a wall, thick, suffocating, hanging in the air between the hurried agents typing at their desks.

It was obvious what they were doing: scrambling to cover up the fact that three supervillains had slipped through their fingers completely, walking away with whatever they'd come for.

Gem, like Joel, had no idea what the stolen item really was. The agency had kept them in the dark, and for good reason.

They couldn't know that their higher ups had once considered violating their own sacred code: the promise to capture and reform superpowered criminals, not kill them. The drive hadn't just held data, it had held schematics for weapons designed specifically to take human lives, and almost half the agency's top heroes, Grian included, had wanted those weapons in their hands.

He glanced at Gem as she talked softly beside him, her brow furrowed with worry for the city, not for the secret they were hiding.

If someone was deserving of the title, it was her and never Grian, he never wanted to be what be a hero, Gem was one of the few who still honored the code with every fiber of her being, who truly believed people could change if given the chance.

The thought of her finding out that he, along with heroes she admired, had been ready to throw that all away made his chest tight.

He'd spent so long fighting villains like Ringmaster, but standing in the chaotic aftermath, he couldn't help but wonder if the line between hero and villain was thinner than he'd ever admitted.

"I think it's the fact I'm still bleeding," he said, part lie, part excuse, rolling his shoulder as if the pain was what was fogging his head.

But the truth was worse: the heavy, gnawing weight in his chest had nothing to do with his grazed thigh. It was the cost of his mimic power, the way it didn't just steal abilities, but siphoned off the emotions that came with them. And right now, he was drowning in Ringmaster's. The man hadn't been proud of this heist, that much was clear from the hollow disappointment that settled in Grian's bones, sharper and more profound than any shame he'd ever felt on his own.

"The fact I'm still reeling from Ringmaster's emotions...gotta love my ability!" He laughed, but it came out flat and bitter.

"Honestly, I didn't know we'd face the Bamboozlers," Gem said, her brow furrowed as they walked. "I refused to believe they planned this heist to go this way."

Already, footage was circulating through HQ: the trio's first run at the bank, triggering alarms left and right, missing the vault entirely.

They'd been working off an old map, the vaults and valuables had been moved months ago, leaving Boogeyman stumbling through hallways, his invisibility useless against outdated blueprints.

It was messy. Unplanned. Nothing like the smooth, calculated crimes the trio had committed .

“Ms. Slayer? Can we talk to you for a moment?” A staff member called out from across the busy corridor, and Gem sighed, her worry for him obvious in the way her eyes scanned his masked face.

“It’s fine, you go do your job,” Grian assured her, huffing a little to sound more annoyed than he felt.

“I’m fine, I can handle myself.”

“I’ll be back,” she promised, giving his arm a quick squeeze before heading off. “Go to the medbay quickly and get yourself fixed up!”

As she walked away, Grian leaned against a wall, the disappointment in his chest twisting tighter.

Ringmaster’s feeling, his feeling, he couldn’t tell them apart anymore.

And the thought that even the Bamboozlers had messed up their own plan, that this whole thing had been a chaotic mess masked by Ringmaster’s charm...it just made him feel more lost than ever.

“I need to get myself together,” Grian muttered, straightening up, every muscle coiled tight.

The G’s were the last thing he needed right now, five vultures in hero costumes, hungry for more power than the agency gave them.

“You look like shit, Synapse.” Morphling, his cyan hair styled sharp enough to cut, that infuriating grin fixed on his face.

“Rusty, too, letting Ringmaster waltz off the roof and needing Slayer to play bodyguard. Cute.”

Grian’s lip curled behind his mask.

“At least I didn’t spend ten minutes chasing an invisible man around a bank vault,” he shot back, his voice laced with acid.

“Heard you did manage to nick Boogeyman, nice beating. Real impressive. Shame he still slipped through your fingers, though. Guess *‘better than me’* is a low bar you’re finally clearing.”

Scott leaned in, his eyes glinting with challenge. “Hey, at least I didn’t get so distracted by flirting with the enemy, you spending too much time with Joel, that you let your boyfriend make you forget the whole point of the mission.”

Each word was thick with mockery, and Grian knew exactly what he meant, word had been spreading through the city about the weird, charged back-and-forth between Synapse and Ringmaster.

The kind that made people raise their eyebrows and whisper about “flirting in the middle of a brawl.”

“Jealous you don’t have a villain who’d bother to look at you twice?” Grian hissed back.

“Or just mad the agency still sees me as the golden boy while you and your little pack scrap over table scraps?”

“*Golden boy* my ass,” Scott snickered, not backing down an inch. “Watcher’s gonna chew you up for losing Ringmaster and the drive. Me? I at least have a wounded villain to show for it. Guess that’s why they’re talking about giving me the lead on the next op, not the guy who can’t tell a fight from a date.”

The jab landed hard, but Grian just smiled coldly behind his mask. “Keep dreaming, Scott. When I catch the bamboozlers, I will... I’ll make sure you’re there to watch me do it better than you ever could.”

Chapter 4: coincidence?

Chapter Summary

"You are enjoying this," Ringmaster said, amusement and pain warring in his tone. His voice modulator did its best to smooth out the edges, but Grian could hear the effort it took to hold back a snarl.

"Who? Me? I'm trying to help you," Grian said, his tone saccharine sweet. He needed to remind himself that even though Eclipse wasn't as injured as Ringmaster, she could still maim him with her spear. It wasn't pointed at him anymore, but it was well within her reach. Grian worked quickly, his hands moving with practiced efficiency even as he deliberately ignored Ringmaster's pained grunts and Eclipse's wary gaze. "Don't move too much; we don't want to undo my hard work."

Chapter Notes



10k words where we explore more of this universe. It took a while for me to actually write this next chapter, but with the new year and new friends.

I have found new motivation to continue this story. No further due, this is chapter four.

When the meeting was held, Grian was well and back in proper shape. This was literal in every sense of the word. Just a few hours earlier, he had sustained a grazed thigh from a bullet. While such an injury would typically have taken days to heal naturally, the agency employs people with healing-type abilities so exclusive, they sound like a myth outside of the Agency walls. After spending only five minutes with one of these doctors, everything was back to normal, as if he hadn't been injured to begin with.

These healers are so rare and effective that they're practically exclusive to the Agency, which speaks volumes about how much the Agency values Grian, prioritizing him even for minor injuries. It's a testament to his importance within it.

The Agency prided itself on being a beacon of hope for those born with extraordinary abilities, a place where superhumans with powers spanning every conceivable place were welcomed with open arms. They'd always taught their charges to be grateful, emphasizing that in exchange for using their gifts in service for greater good, they were spared the fear of being branded monsters by a world that didn't understand them.

What's more, the Agency's medical and research teams explained that abilities left unused often atrophied over time, fading until they were lost entirely; by integrating their powers into structured operations, members ensured their gifts remained strong and stable. Healing bruises and bullet wounds was just one small way they could give back while keeping their abilities sharp.

Well you see, about thirty years before Grian ever stepped into their headquarters, the Agency had already built its foundation on control, framing it as protection for every superpowered individual in the nation. Back then, people with abilities were hunted like anomalies, feared by the non-powered majority who saw their gifts as threats to them. It was Madam Watcher who seized the moment, reshaping the narrative with an almost uncanny precision that would define generations to come. She overhauled the agency's entire approach: instead of hiding superhumans away, she crafted a propaganda machine that turned them into symbols of hope, of safety.

Hero careers were packaged like polished commodities, complete with public appearances, branded merchandise, and carefully curated stories of "saving the people" that directed gratitude toward the agency itself, not to the heroes.

The message was clear: *without us, you are monsters. With us, you are beloved heroes.*

In exchange for their loyalty and the full use of their abilities, the agency promised safety from persecution, a stable life, and the adoration of a public finally seeing them as guardians, all while quietly channeling their powers toward the agency's own goals, from quelling unrest to advancing political interests.

That's why Grian is currently bending over backwards—he knows he'll face catastrophic backlash for the slip-up that let the Bamboozlers, the agency's biggest thorn in the side for years, pull off their heist.

"As you all know, we've been made fools of by three rogues who think they're above the law," Madam Watcher said, perched at the head of the meeting table in her sharp purple-and-black two-piece suit. Her grey hair was pulled so tight in a bun it seemed to stretch the skin of her forehead, and her gaze swept over the room like cold water.

Grian knew he was about to be the focus of this meeting, his luck had run completely dry. "The Bamboozlers stole something from Mr. Keeper," she continued, her voice carrying a lightness that was far more suffocating than a shout, everyone at the table knew she was anything but calm or pleased with any of this. "I'm sure you're wondering what."

"What was taken is a garnet—a beautiful gemstone valued at nearly five billion dollars, a family heirloom that must be recovered quickly." It was a flimsy cover-up. But would work enough since everyone knows how materialist Keeper is. But the actual item prize was Warden, containing Keeper's weapon proposal, plans the agency had strictly forbidden before under its "no killing" rule, the reason for this mess.

Madam Watcher's eyes locked onto him, and she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the polished wood. A smile curved her lips, but it never reached her pale, sharp eyes. "Synapse, my dear boy," she said, and the words felt like silk wrapped around glass. "I've always seen you as more than just an asset, like a son I never had."

'I'm not your son' he wanted to snap at her.

"Which is why I know you'll take personal responsibility for cleaning up this mess," she purred, her voice curling around his neck like it's aiming to choke him.

He'd let his position go to his head, blinded by the bruised ego that came after he'd been taken down by Boogeyman—one of the few villains who'd ever managed to leave him marked.

He wasn't thinking straight back then, desperate to find a way to stop threats like that for good. So when Keeper approached him with the weapon proposal, Grian had pushed for it hard, arguing that stricter measures were needed to protect both heroes and civilians.

And Madam Watcher, oddly enough, had listened.

'I can't really say no to you, my dear. So why not? I'm sure you mean well with this little venture.'

Her words echoed in his head as he sank into his chair, running a hand over his face. That "little venture," that small allowance she'd granted him, was now a noose tightening around his neck.

If Warden fell into the wrong hands, if anyone found out the agency had even considered breaking its own rules, everything he'd worked for would crumble. Worse still, it would prove every doubt people had about him right.

In plain terms: *You pushed for these weapons. You clean up this mess.*

"After all, a mother only asks the best of her children... and she always expects them to deliver."

"Are we to ignore that he let the ringleader get away?" Scott cut in.

Of course he would pile on. Asshole, Grian thought, gripping his chair arm.

Watcher shifted her gaze to the shapeshifter, who met her stare without flinching. They'd never gotten along, but Grian could sense she was weighing whatever dark idea Scott was hatching. "Well, what do you propose, Morphling?"

"Let me handle this, or better yet, make certain he actually does his job for once." Scott's voice started with a deliberate, almost clumsy stutter that made it sound like he was nervous, everyone in the room knew it was an act to get enough attention. Because everyone knows that Watcher rarely let him wield real influence over missions, but the shapeshifter had a way of turning even the tightest restrictions to his advantage.

He leaned back in his chair, a charismatic grin spreading across his face, one that made Grian's teeth clench. Scott moved with a fluid confidence that drew eyes, and even Gem and Joel were listening to him.

It's a problem if even Joel was listening to Scott. Despite the amount of rubbish that Scott spat out, he can be very pervasive.

The cyan haired bastard was when it came to talking his way into things. "*After all,*" he continued, his stutter vanishing completely as he fixed Grian with a sharp look, "we can't afford another slip-up. Not when there's five billion dollars' worth of heritage on the line. Especially not from someone who seems... distracted whenever the Ringmaster's name comes up."

Grian hated that stupid rumor with every fiber of his being, the claims that he and the supervillain were in love, that feelings ran both ways. It had started nearly two years ago, when the media, with their knack for sniffing out drama, noticed Ringmaster often went out of his way to get his attention. At first, it was just framed as a rivalry: the top hero targeted by a rising criminal mastermind. But as cameras caught more of their interactions, split-second pauses, exchanges that lasted a beat too long, people began insisting there was more to it than good versus evil.

Soon enough, tabloids were splashing headlines about "undeniable chemistry" between them, and the gossip had seeped all the way into the agency.

It was one of the reasons the Bamboozlers trio was still free, rumors that Grian had gone easy on their leader not by accident, but because he'd developed feelings for the silver-tongued criminal.

Grian's face burned with raw irritation every time he heard it, not embarrassment. Scott knew exactly what he was doing: dragging gossip into the meeting either to undermine him or just to get under his skin.

I would rather kill myself than fall in love with a criminal, he thought bitterly, shoving down the urge to strangle Scott.

"The way I see it," Scott went on, his voice dropping to a more serious tone that still held a hint of menace, "either I go in alongside him to keep things on track, or I take point entirely. My team's been tracking the Bamboozlers for months; we know their patterns better than anyone else in this room."

Grian's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, his voice dangerously low. "You've been withholding data this whole time?"

Scott shrugged, a picture of nonchalance. "Withholding? No, no. Just... prioritizing. We wanted to be absolutely sure before presenting anything. Wouldn't want to waste everyone's time with half-baked theories, would we?" He gave Grian a saccharine smile. "Besides, you've been so busy lately, I didn't want to bother you with the details."

"Bother me?" Grian echoed, his grip tightening on the table. "Well, yes. You've been rather busy." Scott said. Grian can't even deny that. Madam Watcher's fingers tapped slowly against the tabletop, her eyes flicking between the two men. She knew full well Scott and his faction had their own stake in the "gemstone," they'd been pushing for access to Keeper's resources long before Grian had. Letting Scott take charge would mean chaos for Grian, as the shapeshifter would stop at nothing to seize control of whatever was on that drive, Watcher was unpredictable enough that she might just say yes to see what Grian would do.

"It's hard to focus on retrieving priceless heirlooms when you're busy making eyes at the thief, isn't it?"

The power struggle hung thick in the air, Grian, the agency's "golden son," against Scott, the ambitious bastard who'd built his following by playing to both heroes and the public. Every word was about the stolen 'garnet' on the surface, but beneath it lay a battle for control over what really mattered, and who would pay the price if it fell into the wrong hands.

"Where do you even get this information?" Grian shot back, feeling like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff with Scott shoving harder by the second. "How is this... this *nonsense* supposed to help us get anything back? I didn't know you'd traded in hero work for running a gossip blog, Morphling." His voice was sharp with a snarl he couldn't hold back, his knuckles white where he gripped the table edge.

Scott only smiled wider, leaning forward with that same charismatic glint in his eyes. "Information is information, Synapse," he purred. "Even the kind that tells us who we can trust to stay focused when the pressure's on."

"*Enough.*" Madam Watcher's voice cut through the tension like a blade, and the room fell silent at once. She straightened in her seat, her gaze sweeping over both men with a coldness that brooked no argument. "I will consider your proposition, Morphling, but do not mistake this for permission to meddle where you aren't wanted." Her eyes fixed on Grian then, and that false maternal warmth was gone entirely, replaced by steely resolve.

"I trust that Synapse will be the one to deliver what we need. The garnet will be recovered, and any loose ends tied up. That is not up for debate."

"Meeting dismissed. Synapse kindly follow me to my office." Watcher's voice left no room for argument, and she was out the door before anyone could move. Grian knew the old military tactic well: when a superior favors one person too openly, resentment festers among the rest. In his seven years as Synapse, the agency's so-called "*golden boy*," the perks had been real enough: better resources, top-tier training, access to information others could only dream of.

But moments like this, when a single mistake threatened to unravel everything the agency had built, that favor curdled into a blade pressed tight against his throat. Of course, no one can act on their hatred, not when facing a hero who could copy their powers and cut them off from using them entirely. His training had been relentless: learning to dissect every ability, no matter how trivial, and twist it into a tool of devastating efficiency.

He'd spent countless hours analyzing how to make others' powers work better than they ever could themselves. He knew Scott and his inner circle wanted him gone. It hadn't always been

this way; once, they'd been something close to friends. But Grian clung to routine, to the agency's rules as he understood them, while Scott and his lot were always pushing into gray areas that never sat right with him.

Grian liked to tell himself he was better than them, that he didn't crave power the way they did. He still held onto scraps of self-respect. Yet he was the one who'd given the G's and Keeper Corp the platform to propose those weapons in the first place.

Because deep inside, you're a terrible, horrible monster, a voice sneered in the back of his mind as he pushed out of his chair and headed for Watcher's office.

The walk to Watcher's office felt longer than usual, the sterile hallway walls seeming to close in as Grian moved forward. When he pushed open the heavy oak door, she was already standing at her floor-to-ceiling window, staring out at the city skyline below, tiny figures of heroes patrolling the streets like clockwork toys.

"Close the door, my boy," she said without turning around. Her voice was soft, almost lulling, but it made Grian's skin prickle.

He obeyed, the click of the latch echoing in the quiet room like a lock turning shut. As she finally turned to face him, he found himself thinking of those rusty fortune-teller coin machines he'd seen once at a dingy fairground as a child, their painted faces fixed in permanent smiles, gears grinding beneath the surface as they spat out generic prophecies to anyone who fed them.

Watcher was just like that: polished on the outside, but underneath, everything was old, corroded, and built to manipulate. Watcher stepped toward him, her hands moving as if to cup his face, he flinched back before she could touch him.

"You know I only want what's best for you," she said, circling him slowly like a predator sizing up prey. "For us. You are part of this agency in a way no one else is—you're my legacy. My son in every way that matters."

The words felt like insects crawling over his skin. He had parents—they'd raised him with gentle hands and honest words before an accident took them when he was twenty. But Watcher acted as if those years had never existed, as if she'd carved him from stone herself and could twist him however she pleased.

"Look at them," she continued, gesturing back to the window. "All those heroes out there, they think they're choosing to serve. They think the love they receive is real. But I built this stage, Grian. I pull the strings. Every smile, every cheer, every moment of gratitude, it's all been calibrated, all been designed to keep them in line."

She stopped directly in front of him now, and he could smell the sharp scent of her perfume mixed with something metallic like rust. "You think you're different because you know the truth. But that's exactly why you're more useful than the rest. You're my most perfect puppet, you understand how the strings work, and still you dance when I say so."

Grian's breath caught in his throat. That really paints an ugly picture on his mind, every mission he'd led, every speech he'd given, every choice he'd made had been guided by her invisible hand. "Like that old machine," he whispered, his voice rough. "You take what we give you, our loyalty, our powers, our lives, and you spit back whatever you think we need to hear to keep going." Watcher's smile widened, and this time it showed too many teeth.

"Exactly, my boy. And you'll keep feeding the machine, because you know what happens to those who don't. They become... *irrelevant.*" The word hung in the air, heavy and final. Grian felt trapped, not by walls or chains, but by the suffocating certainty that he was just another cog in her corroded machine, one she could discard the moment he stopped serving her purpose.

As Synapse, he had no control, every mission, every public appearance, every word he spoke was scripted. They'd even dictated how he styled his hair, how he carried himself, what jokes he'd tell to win over crowds.

The thing was, both of them knew he would never stop being Synapse, Grian couldn't be anything else, not when the public's adoration and the agency's structure were all he'd known since his powers awakened.

But he was starting to think maybe Synapse didn't have to be *her* Synapse. He thought of fungus spreading their spores, twisting whatever they touched to their own purpose. That's what she was: a fungus growing over his life, sending tendrils into every corner of his past

and future. But even fungus couldn't stop a seed from pushing through the rot, reaching for light it had never known.

"You're a clever child, you know better than to let others pull you under," she continued, her voice a soft hum that made his bones itch.

"Because you'd be nothing if you weren't Synapse. You can't be what you wanted anymore. That dream of being a vet died the day you shook my hand and signed those papers almost eight years ago."

It felt unfair, that she could say those words, and Grian could do nothing but stand there, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached. The urge to snarl like a cornered animal burned hot in his throat, because Scott was right, wasn't he?

Grian was her lap dog, tied to this crone with invisible chains that burrowed deeper than any collar ever could. Like a host overtaken by fungus, he'd started to look and act like the thing that had claimed him, even as part of him still fought to remember what he'd been before. "I'm working on it," he ground out, his gaze fixed on a spot just past her shoulder. "I'll handle it, I- I know what to do."

"Oh I know, Grian. You will handle it. You know what the G's would do if they got their hands on Warden, they've been clawing for those weapons since the day you denied them access. Tell me again, why the sudden change of heart?" Her pale blue eyes bore into his dark ones, cold as winter ice.

But the crone already knew the answer, of course. She liked pretending she didn't. She liked to make him say it, to drag his shame into the light. He met her stare then, his throat tight, words dying before they could form. Instead, he just stood there in the heavy silence, shoulders squared, hands curled into fists at his sides, as the truth hung between them, thick and bitter as tar. "Fine, keep your secret." Watcher let out a sharp laugh that cut through the silence like broken glass, her demeanor shifting on a dime as if the heavy tension had never existed at all.

She waved a hand in dismissal, already turning back to her desk and shuffling through a stack of files. "We'll pretend it never came up, you know how I hate dwelling on things that don't serve us." Grian didn't answer. Watcher let him be, she'd always preferred seeing him struggle to hide his flaws, as if his attempts at secrecy were some kind of game she'd already won.

She was twisted that way; Grian never knew what to expect. One moment she'd be overbearing, fussing over every detail of his work and life, and the next she'd cast him aside without a second thought, ready to let him fall if it served her purpose. "Speaking of the G's," she went on, a flicker of dark amusement crossing her face, "Scott is determined to see you *gone*. That boy has always loved undermining me as much as he loves undermining you, disobeying orders, cutting deals behind my back, building his little faction into something that thinks it can challenge me." Her fingers traced the edge of her desk, leaving faint scratches in the polished wood like claws.

"It amuses me, in a way. Their hunger for power is so raw, so obvious. But it also irritates me. I built this agency to be controlled, but alas, people love greed."

"Are you not worried that they'll get their hands on Warden?" Grian asked, his voice quiet but steady. The question was just out of curiosity, but it drew another amused laugh from her, one as unsettling as the fixed smile she'd worn earlier.

"They are like kittens batting at strings. I'm just giving them something to play with." The words settled heavy in Grian's chest as he was reminded, yet again, that Madam Watcher didn't hold her position by chance. She saw every move Scott and his faction made as if they were pieces on a board she'd set up herself, their greed, their plotting, their hunger for control all part of a game she'd been playing long before any of them were even recruited. There was no worry in her voice, not even a hint of concern, only a cool, detached amusement, like watching insects crawl over a leaf she'd placed just for them.

He didn't know if he was lucky to be her so-called favorite, or if that just made him a bigger target for both her whims and the resentment of others.

The forced lightness of her tone made Grian's skin prickle, every hair on the back of his neck standing on end. But he said nothing as she waved a dismissive hand, her attention already back on the files spread across her desk.

"You're dismissed, Synapse. Go on now, start planning how you'll get our little problem sorted out. And remember," she added without looking up, her pen already scratching across paper, "I expect results before this becomes more than a trivial distraction."

Grian turned and walked out, the door clicking shut behind him as his resentment slowly simmered to the surface, hot and sharp, but buried deep enough that no one passing in the hallway would notice.

It had been three days since the heist, and the agency was working overtime to sweep the mess under the rug. They'd spun the story to the public, and to most of their own heroes, about an attempt to stop thieves from making off with a rare, priceless gemstone. *How the Agency has it under control.*

They painted the picture that the Bamboozlers had walked away with nothing at all, nothing for the public to doubt the agency's infallibility. It was always the case: cover it up until the actual problem was solved, no matter how many lies it took to keep the facade intact.

"Why do you and Joel always get into fights with Scott or any of the G's?" Gem asked, ducking under another of his punches as they circled each other in the training ring. Her movements were smooth, practiced, she'd always been better at defensive combat than he was, turning his every advance away like water sliding off glass.

"Because Scott is a *prude*," Joel replied from the sidelines, not even looking up from wrapping his knuckles. He'd finished his own sparring session minutes ago and had made himself comfortable leaning against the ring's ropes. The three of them were widely considered a cut above the G's faction, Joel and Gem worked as a seamless duo, their powers complementing each other perfectly, while Grian operated as Synapse, rarely paired with anyone else. He did things at his own pace, in his own way.

Keeper himself had put on quite the show, yelling at Watcher in front of half the lower ranks about protecting his family's legacy. But the truth sat heavy in Grian's gut: what had really

been stolen was a USB drive loaded with weapons built specifically to eliminate superhumans who defied the agency. *The Bamboozlers* were at the top of that target list. He couldn't tell Gem or Joel any of it.

They had to stay in the dark, if they knew the agency had come this close to breaking its own no-kill rule, everything they'd believed about serving the "greater good" would shatter. Grian's fists tightened as he threw another jab, missing when Gem side-stepped him easily.

Joel had leaned against the ropes, scowling as he spoke, his dislike for Scott had always been as obvious as it was unfiltered.

"He never could stand the fact that others might be better than him. Every time he looked at Grian, he'd be reminded that for all his skill, he wasn't really much when Synapse was in the picture."

Scott had been good at his job, exceptionally good. As an animal shapeshifter, he'd mastered every form he'd taken: swift as a falcon in the air, strong as a bear in close combat, quiet as a fox when stealth was needed. He'd led missions that others had deemed impossible, turning failures into victories with a sharp mind and even sharper instincts.

The public loved Scott too, he'd had a charm that drew people in, a raw charisma that made them believe in him.

But envy curdled that talent into something bitter. Everyone watched Grian rise through the ranks in half the time it takes most of them to be where they are.

Everyone knew how Watcher would pause to ask Grian's opinion before even glancing at Scott's own reports.

Every billboard with Grian's face, every news segment praising his quick thinking, every mention of his "unique and invaluable abilities" had felt like a slap in the face.

What was an animal shapeshifter to a man who could copy any power? Scott had trained his whole life to perfect the gifts he'd been born with, while Grian could simply reach out and take the strength, speed, or skill of anyone around him, then block them from using it entirely even if it's under short time.

Scott had built himself from the ground up, but Grian had been handed a tool that made every hero's hard-won mastery feel trivial.

Grian took a long drink, letting Joel's words cover for him. He was still coiled tight from everything that had happened. Three days felt like a week, how everything was happening at once, Watcher's expectation, Scott's taunts. He threw the bottle away after drinking enough that he could move again. "So you're saying that Scott doesn't like the fact that Grian is doing his job?" Gem asked. Grian can't really fault her being too confused with how inner politics of the Agency works, Gem was after all the newest member of the ranked heroes. "I guess it doesn't help that the Watcher clearly favors Grian as well."

Grian had more on his plate than he could easily carry, overwhelming, *yes*, but he'd always pushed through. He tossed the empty water bottle out of the ring and settled into a solid defensive stance, his focus sharpening as he locked eyes with Gem.

"Scott always wanted to be firmer with the higher-ups, especially Watcher," Joel explained to her, gesturing broadly as he spoke. It was no secret the agency ran a tight ship; rules were non-negotiable, and deviance was met with consequences few dared to face.

It was almost funny, really. Everyone seemed to want more than what the agency dictated, more freedom, more control over their own powers, more say in how things were run.

But Synapse was the opposite of that. Grian was the opposite. He'd signed away so much of himself eight years ago that he could barely picture being anything other than a hero. Without the agency, without the title, without the purpose they'd carved out for him, there was nothing left he recognized as his own.

"Joel and Scott have a rivalry that goes way back. I try to be civil, but it just... goes out the window," Grian admitted, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

It was the truth, he'd never set out to actively fight with the shapeshifter, but something always sparked between them the moment they were in the same room. Like flint striking steel, it never failed to ignite friction. He'd developed a nasty habit of getting under Scott's skin, and the tension stemmed from more than just personality clashes.

Grian was the agency's golden boy, adored by the public, his face plastered on every billboard across the city and leading every evening news segment that covered hero work.

Madam Watcher consulted him on everything from high-stakes mission strategies to minor public relations decisions, while Scott and his group went out of their way to operate outside her direct influence. Especially now with the newest addition to the G's: Terra, a former villain once known as Locust. Though not everyone knew about that past.

It was another reason he kept a close eye on the G's. In his eyes, they were a bad crowd of heroes, too willing to bend rules, too quick to align with those who'd once stood against everything the agency claimed to represent.

Scott's faction had made it clear they wanted no part of being her "pets," even as they quietly built their own power base, striking deals with local officials and recruiting heroes who felt overlooked by Watcher's favoritism.

"That explains half of the problem," Gem said, and before he could shift his weight or react, she'd spun on her heel and pinned him firmly between her thighs, holding him in place with effortless strength despite his size. "But why can't you just be professional? You're both supposed to be fighting for the same thing, aren't you?"

Joel and Grian exchanged a look of pure exasperation. Professionalism was barely an option when it came to them and the G's, there was just too much history, too much tension pulling them apart like magnets with the same charge. Grian had become a constant thorn in their side, especially Scott's. Every success, every nod of approval from Watcher, every cheer from the crowd felt like salt in old wounds that never quite healed.

"Everyone knows that Grian is the favorite. And honestly? He earns it, his power's about as flexible as they come," Joel huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. For all his bluster and oversized ego, Joel never hesitated to acknowledge real talent when he saw it. "Steal someone's ability and block them from using it for three minutes? That's not something you train for, it's just plain game-changing."

Grian had risen through the ranks faster than anyone in the agency's recent memory. He'd become a hero at twenty-seven, and within two years as Synapse, he'd helped rebuild public confidence that had been shattered by a string of rogue attacks, drawing in thousands of new supporters and cementing his place as their golden poster child.

"He looked way too pleased with himself as well, when Watcher tore into Grian during the meeting," Joel added, wincing as Grian launched a flurry of rapid-fire punches, each one met with a clean, precise block from Gem. She barely broke her focus as she stepped back to create space, her eyes still locked on Grian's.

"You could practically see him preening, like he finally got the proof he needed that you're not as perfect as everyone thinks." Joel continued, Grian grunted, his blocks barely doing anything to block Gem's counter punches, as his focus slipped for a split second, Scott's smug face flashing across his mind again. He'd felt Scott's eyes burning into him the entire time Watcher had dressed him down during that meeting, satisfaction radiating off the shapeshifter in thick, palpable waves. It was like Scott had been waiting years for that moment, when the golden boy finally stumbled in front of everyone.

It was one more thing to add to the long list of reasons their relationship could never be smoothed over, no matter how hard anyone tried. "Can I say something?" Gem asked, and Grian immediately pulled back, letting her step away and catch her breath.

The ginger squared her shoulders, her expression set, ready to say her piece whether they wanted to hear it or not. "It's stupid to make such a fuss out of it. Keeper's literally one of the richest men in the city, can't he just buy a new one?" Her voice was sharp with frustration as she reset her stance, fighting to keep up with Grian's relentless barrage of punches now that he'd picked up his pace again.

Gem stumbled backward, her feet sliding on the mat as she barely dodged a hook that whistled past her ear. The force of the near-miss sent her hair flying across her face. Gem shook her head to clear it, eyes narrowing as she readjusted her guard, planting her feet

firmly. "I get that it's supposed to be an heirloom, but the amount of fuss over it... it feels like there's more to it than anyone's saying. Like the garnet's just an excuse for something bigger." He faked left, then pivoted hard to the right, his fist grazing her shoulder and sending her stumbling another step back across the mat.

"Honestly, Gem, you're overthinking it," Grian said, letting that practiced, easy tone settle over his words, the one he'd honed until it was as smooth as polished glass, the one that made crowds cheer and citizens trust him without a second thought. "Keeper's always been materialistic. Of course he's going to kick up a fuss over that stupid garnet."

"Still, it's just a stupid stone," Gem protested, regaining her balance and raising her guard again. Her eyes were sharp with suspicion, she'd always been too good at reading between the lines, picking up on things he'd rather keep hidden.

"It feels like there's got to be more to it than that."

"Keeper's just being dramatic about family nonsense. Old money types always are." He circled her slowly, his movements deliberate now, no longer rushing. "It's not like anything actually important was taken."

The lie sat heavy on his tongue, it still doesn't felt right. Lying to Gem and Joel, Grian knew full well the garnet was just a cover, that the real prize had been Warden, filled with files that could unravel everything Watcher had built. But he couldn't say that, not even to Gem.

Some secrets were locked away too tight, even from allies. He eased up on his punches, his movements slowing to give Gem space to catch her breath. The sharp focus in his eyes softened into the warm, concerned look he'd made sure was second nature around them, one that had never felt quite so heavy to wear, like a mask he'd forgotten how to take off.

"Yeah... I guess you're right," Gem said, though her voice lacked conviction. She wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, her gaze lingering on him for a beat too long before she looked away, as if trying to see past the polished facade he'd put up.

"Old families and their heirlooms, whole worlds built on shiny rocks and stories." She shifted her weight, adjusting her gloves with deliberate care, her mind clearly still turning over the pieces that didn't fit.

"Still...the way Watcher's been acting about it—it just doesn't add up."

But Grian just met her eyes, a quiet plea in his expression to let it go. Gem sighed, rolling her eyes with a mix of frustration and fondness. "But who am I to question the boss," she muttered, though her tone made it clear she wasn't going to drop it that easily.

"Look, I know you're frustrated," he said, stepping back a few paces and gesturing for her to take a drink from the bottle Joel held out. The plastic was cool against her palm as she took a long sip, water dripping down her chin onto her shirt.

"But some things are better left to the higher-ups. You and Joel already carry more than enough on your plates. I've got it handled, alright? You can trust me on this."

"If you fail, Scott will surely make sure you never recover from this," Joel pointed out, pulling out his phone to tap at the screen, his thumb scrolling quickly through what was probably another alert about the Bamboozlers' latest movements, or maybe a message from whoever he'd been quietly seeing these past few months.

Gem had mentioned something about it once, a soft smile on her face when she'd teased Joel about finally settling down a little. "He's been waiting for an excuse to push you out for ages," Joel continued, not looking up from his phone's glowing screen.

"The G's have been quietly spreading word that you're too close to Watcher, that you're more loyal to her than to the agency's actual mission. If this goes south, they'll use it to paint you as a liability, and they'll have half the agency backing them up."

"I know," Grian replied, finally stepping back to call an end to their spar. His chest heaved with exertion, and sweat dripped down his temples as he grabbed a towel to wipe his face, the rough fabric feeling good against his overheated skin.

It wasn't just failure he feared, Scott would pounce the moment he made the slightest mistake. That little snake was more than eager to snatch both the credit and the Warden weapons for himself.

But that was only half the problem. Madam Watcher had made her stance crystal clear: those weapons must never see the light of day. If Scott and his "G's" got to them first and handed them back to Keeper, that ruthless tycoon would push production into overdrive without a second thought.

Weapons built to neutralize any superhuman who refused to fall in line, once they existed, the agency would become nothing more than a hollow shell. The G's wouldn't need oversight anymore; they'd be free to act as judge, jury, and executioner whenever it suited their agenda.

And Grian would carry the weight of that guilt forever, he'd been the one to give them a platform to even propose such things.

Rabid dogs like them can't be let off their leashes, he thought grimly.

The G's didn't care about protecting people; they cared about stacking power in their own hands. If they got their way, Scott would rewrite every rule to fit his ambitions, and everything Grian had spent years building would crumble to dust. His influence would vanish, the agency would fade into nothing, and all the trust he'd earned would be for nothing.

"You know you can trust us, right? You've got me and Joel." Gem's voice made him pause mid-step. He looked at the ginger, her face open and earnest, no trace of the suspicion she'd held moments ago, just pure loyalty.

Then he turned to Joel, who just nodded firmly, phone tucked away now, no bluster, no grand words, just quiet certainty in his dark eyes. "Yeah," Joel said simply. "We're family."

The words hit him harder than any punch from their spar, hard enough to make his chest tighten.

For eight years, he'd let Watcher's voice be the only one that mattered, letting her define who he was and what he was worth. But standing here with them, he realized he'd been building something real all along, something that didn't depend on titles or billboards or her approval.

For a moment, everything felt just a little lighter, like a breath of fresh air in a room he'd thought was sealed shut. He managed a small, genuine smile before pulling out his own phone to call a cab. "Thanks," he said quietly as he waited for the driver to confirm their arrival, his thumb hovering over the screen. "I'll keep that in mind."

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The elevator doors slid open to Grian's floor with a soft ding, the sound felt hollow in the quiet hallway, just like everything else about this part of his life. He unlocked the door to his apartment, and the familiar silence washed over him like cold water, sharp and unforgiving.

High ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city skyline where lights twinkled like scattered embers, polished hardwood floors that reflected every shadow, all the things that were supposed to mean "success" in the agency's world.

But right now, the space just felt empty. Too big, too clean, too carefully curated to feel like a home. Grian dropped his bag by the door and wandered into the living room, collapsing onto the sofa with a sigh that seemed to soak deep into the cushions. The leather was cool against his skin, and he let his head fall back, staring at the blank TV screen mounted on the wall.

Maybe I should get cats, he thought, his gaze drifting to the window where a stray bird perched on the ledge for a moment before fluttering away. At least then there'd be something to come home to, something warm and living that didn't care about Synapse, or the agency, or whether he'd failed to stop the heist or kept secrets from the only people he trusted. Something to keep him company in this too big, too silent apartment. That would rub against his hand and purr, demanding nothing more than food and a soft place to curl up.

Grian closed his eyes, letting the city's distant hum wrap around him. For the first time all day, he let himself stop fighting, just for a little while. The blonde could picture it: beautiful babies curling up on his lap while he made dinner, purring loud enough to drown out the silence. Even if he knew it was just a little daydream it was a nice thought.

A stupid one, maybe, he was never home long enough to care for anything that needed consistency, always chasing after the next threat or cleaning up the agency's messes. But nice all the same. Because what did he have when he wasn't Synapse? Just this empty box of an apartment, and memories of a life he'd signed away the day he'd put on the suit.

No one was waiting for him at the door, no traditions to keep, no place he truly belonged beyond the walls of headquarters. Maybe he should take a break from it all, ask for a little bit of rest before he waded into the fallout of his choices, before Scott or the G's or Watcher pulled him any further into this mess. He pulled out his phone and scrolled to Mumbo's contact. *Mr. Enabler*, the nickname had stuck because that's exactly what his friend did.

He gave Grian what he needed, no questions asked, no judgments passed. Sometimes Grian wondered if it was pure kindness, or something closer to pity, seeing how stretched thin he'd become, how his life had been pulled apart at the seams.

Hey, he typed out, his thumbs moving slowly over the screen.

Thinking of taking some time off from hero stuff for a few days. Can I pick up the late night shifts this week? The ones where I close up alone?

He hit send and tossed the phone onto the coffee table, leaning his head back against the sofa cushions. The clinic after hours was peaceful in a way nothing else in his life was, just the

soft hum of refrigerators storing meds, the quiet rustle of blankets in the kennels where stray animals waited for homes, the smell of antiseptic mixed with something warm and gentle, like lavender and clean fur. It was one of the few places where he could just be Grian, not Synapse, where the only thing that mattered was making sure something small and vulnerable was safe.

He'd just be Grian, the guy who cleaned cages with careful hands, gave shots without making animals flinch, and stayed late to make sure every creature, from the tiniest injured sparrow to the scruffiest stray dog, was comfortable through the night. He'd sweep the floors, restock the shelves, and listen to Mumbo ramble about new treatment methods without having to pretend he had all the answers.

It wasn't the happy life he'd wanted back when he'd first dreamed of being a hero, back when he'd thought saving people would mean building something bright and solid for himself too.

But it was as close as he could get. And right now, that felt like enough to keep him from breaking completely. His phone buzzed on the coffee table, a reply from Mumbo. He didn't need to look to know what it would say. *Of course, mate. Doors are always open for you.*

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Peace was never going to last. He'd had two quiet nights, two whole stretches where no one had mentioned the agency, where the only emergencies had been a kitten with an upset stomach and a dog with a minor cut. So Grian had planned for more of the same: lock up the supplies, double-check the kennels to make sure every latch was secure, and head home to try and clear his head before the real work began again.

Instead, the clinic door burst open without warning, slamming against the wall with a crash that echoed through the quiet space. Ringmaster stumbled through first, pale as paper and bleeding heavily from a deep gash across their side—his usual pristine striped collared shirt left loosely unbuttoned, layered with a black vest, and a small hat upon his head was ruined with his actively bleeding wound. Behind him stood Eclipse, same outfit though she is wearing a skirt and her vest is dark magenta gleaming under the overhead lights, her spear pointed straight at his throat before he could even reach for the panic button or grab anything to protect himself.

The metal tip pressed against his skin, cold and sharp, a stark reminder of how quickly everything could change. Grian wondered how bad his luck could get.

"Easy, easy..." Ringmaster gasped out, wincing as he stumbled forward, still trying to stem the bleeding despite his shaky hands. Dark red seeped through the cloth faster than he could press it down, staining the polished floor beneath his feet.

He met Grian's eyes for a split second, and Grian could swear he saw recognition in those eyes, something sharp and knowing that cut through the haze of pain. But Ringmaster was clearly out of it, swaying on his feet even as Eclipse tightened her grip on his arm to keep him upright.

Grian's mind raced. He was supposed to be hunting them down as Synapse, coordinating with the agency to bring in the city's most wanted villains. Yet here they were, holding him hostage in the one place he'd come to escape it all, where he was just Grian, not a hero or enemy.

"I'm a vet tech," he said carefully, keeping his voice steady even as his heart hammered against his ribs so hard he was sure they could hear it. He let his hands drop slowly to his sides, making no sudden moves.

"I stitch up animals, not—"

"Same muscle, same skin, can't be that hard to stop the bleeding," Eclipse cut him off, her spear not wavering an inch. The modulator couldn't hide the edge of desperation in her voice. "You know where your supplies are. Get to it. If you try anything..." Ringmaster let out a low groan, slumping further against her, his legs giving out completely. Eclipse caught her teammate before he hit the floor, her shoulders tensing with effort as she lowered him carefully to the floor, his weight nearly pulling her down with him.

Grian wanted to snap, wanted to pull something, anything, to turn the tables, but he knew that fighting wasn't an option right now. As far as these two criminals knew, he was just a civilian.

Not when the blade of the spear was on his neck. But he was still going to make excuses, stalling for time, hoping for a miracle. There was a question in a really far part of his brain, why is Ringmaster injured? There shouldn't be any mission or any update of a chase.

"Wait... I don't think that'll work! I'm a vet tech, not a doctor!" Grian blurted out, stepping back slightly as the spear's tip brushed his skin, leaving a faint red line in its wake.

Part of him raged at the thought: *These are the criminals I'm supposed to be bringing in, not patching up. What would Watcher say? What would Joel and Gem think?* But the bigger part of him couldn't stand to watch someone bleed out in front of him, hero or villain be damned.

"You want me to drive this through your throat instead?" Eclipse sneered, her modulator turning the words into a harsh growl that echoed off the clinic walls. She pressed the spear harder, and Grian felt the sharp point break the skin just enough to sting. Even through the mask, Grian could sense her panic beneath the fury, she was just as out of her depth as he was.

"Fine," Grian said quickly, holding his hands up again to show he meant no harm.

"Fine, but I need space to work. And if you're going to stand there with that thing pointed at me, at least help me get him onto the exam table. He'll bleed out faster on the floor." He took a slow step toward the back room, keeping his movements deliberate and calm. Every instinct screamed at him to reach for his phone, to send a silent alert to the agency, but if he did, they'd find out he'd been hiding here, working at a clinic under his real name... it would be over for him. The only place he felt like he was himself. *God damn it.*

"Alright, help me get him up there," Grian said, gesturing towards the exam table. "I need you to keep pressure on the wound while I get some supplies ready." With Eclipse's help, they managed to haul Ringmaster onto the table.

The man groaned as they shifted him, his face contorted in pain. Grian grabbed a clean towel and pressed it firmly against the gash, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral. "What caused this?"

"Arrow," Eclipse grunted, her voice tight with anger and worry. "I already got rid of the arrowhead. It's just an open wound now, but it needs more serious help than we can give him on my own. We can't exactly go to a hospital." Grian examined the wound closely. It was deep and jagged, tearing through muscle and skin.

He could see why Ringmaster was losing so much blood. Grian wanted to retort, *of course you can't go to a hospital*.

They were rogue superpowered individuals with bounties on their heads, active criminals labeled as supervillains by the agency. For anyone unregistered with Watcher's system, even those with harmless abilities, the city's hospitals were wired to alert authorities the moment any unusual physiology or injury patterns were detected. The agency had made sure of it, tightening their grip every year, offering massive bounties for every unregistered super they could round up, no matter how small their power or peaceful their intentions.

That's how ugly things got when you denied Madam Watcher's control: you became prey, plain and simple.

So yes, going to a hospital would be a death sentence waiting to happen. Grian knew this wasn't something he should be doing, but his hands were forced, doesn't mean he couldn't be cranky about it. "Can you move faster?" Eclipse asked, her spear still trained on him as she hovered over Ringmaster.

"I'm trying to make sure your friend won't die because *most of this isn't for humans*," he shot back, sassng her as he rummaged through cabinets. The exam room was stocked with sutures sized for dogs and cats, antiseptic meant for thick fur and tough hide, bandages that would be too small or too bulky for a person's frame. There was nothing to numb the pain, no lidocaine, no local anesthetics meant for human tissue.

The clinic didn't carry them; it wasn't licensed for human care, and getting caught with such supplies would raise questions he couldn't answer.

The hero part of him, the one who'd been humiliated by Ringmaster's tricks more than once, took pleasure at the idea of the man feeling every stitch. "Okay, we will do this the hard way,

be very still" he said flatly, laying out his makeshift supplies on the counter: coarse veterinary sutures, a curved needle meant for closing up large gashes on livestock, and a bottle of concentrated antiseptic that would sting like hell.

That earned him a glare from both, Eclipse's eyes narrowed behind her mask, and even in his semi-conscious state, Ringmaster's jaw tightened. But Grian couldn't give a shit. They hadn't said he needed to be nice while tending to Ringmaster's wound, just that he needed to shut it.

"Don't glare at me, just doing my job," he said, his voice an exasperated coo that was deliberately grating. He was being a menace because this wasn't fun for him, so why should it be easy for them?

Grian poured the antiseptic over a wad of gauze and pressed it firmly against the wound. Ringmaster jolted awake with a sharp cry, his hands flying up to claw at Grian's arm before Eclipse pinned them down, her grip iron-tight.

"Easy," she snapped, though her own hands were shaking slightly. "He's trying to help."

"Helping and torturing look pretty similar right now," Ringmaster gritted out, sweat beading on his forehead as the antiseptic seared into his skin. The smell of it mixed with blood and fear hung heavy in the air. Grian just raised an eyebrow, already threading the thick veterinary needle.

"Torture would be leaving you on the floor to bleed out. This is just... *inconvenient*. For both of us." He leaned in close, his voice dropping to a low murmur. "And for what it's worth? I'd be mad too if I had to get stitched up with supplies meant for a Great Dane."

"You are enjoying this," Ringmaster said, amusement and pain warring in his tone. His voice modulator did its best to smooth out the edges, but Grian could hear the effort it took to hold back a snarl.

"Who? Me? I'm trying to help you," Grian said, his tone saccharine sweet. He needed to remind himself that even though Eclipse wasn't as injured as Ringmaster, she could still

maim him with her spear. It wasn't pointed at him anymore, but it was well within her reach. Grian worked quickly, his hands moving with practiced efficiency even as he deliberately ignored Ringmaster's pained grunts and Eclipse's wary gaze. "Don't move too much; we don't want to undo my hard work."

"You have such a nice personality," Ringmaster said, the words dripping with sarcasm.

"Thank you, I try," Grian replied, tying off the final stitch with a flourish. "Okay, we just need to make sure it's covered, and you're good to go. Though don't move too much for a few days, or you'll rip the whole thing open."

Ringmaster pushed himself up slowly, testing his weight on his feet. He swayed slightly, but Eclipse was there to steady him. "Well, I guess we owe you one," he said, his eyes narrowed behind his mask.

"Don't worry about it," Grian said, already turning away to clean up his mess. "Just try not to get yourselves killed before you can pay me back. My rates aren't cheap."

Eclipse watched the exchange with a mixture of confusion and exasperation. She clearly didn't know whether to be amused by the passive-aggressive banter or just hurt Grian for his cheek.

As Grian scrubbed the blood-stained instruments, the initial panic began to fade, replaced by a simmering annoyance. These were villains, dangerous and unpredictable.

They had no place here, in his sanctuary. He wanted them gone, out of his clinic, out of his life. Not as a hero, not as Synapse—just as Grian, the vet tech who wanted nothing more than to get back to his peaceful night.

"So," he said, turning back to face them, his voice sharper than before. "Now that I've patched you up, how about you two get the hell out of my clinic?"

"You are one rude mister," Ringmaster huffed, feigning offense. "You *literally* broke into my clinic. You want me to be *nice*?" Grian asked, incredulous at the audacity of the man in front

of him. He got reminded why he hated Ringmaster specifically.

He scrubbed harder at the instruments, trying to get the last of the bloodstains out.

"Here, last medical tip for your newly stitched side: you should keep it clean and change your bandages often for the next few days. The stitches and sutures themselves should absorb into your body or flake off in roughly two weeks... depends on how you spend your night. Do you get this bleeding and bruised often?" See, he could be nice, or at least, he could pretend to be for a few more seconds.

The villains seemed genuinely amused by his attitude.

Ringmaster chuckled softly, while even Eclipse's shoulders seemed to relax slightly. But Grian was just tired, bone-deep, soul-weary tired.

He wanted this to be over with. "How are you not scared? Something wrong with you, doctor?" Ringmaster said, tilting his head slightly as he studied Grian.

Grian loathed the fact that the man was taller than him.

As Synapse, he wore combat boots that gave him an added three inches to his usual height, making him feel taller, stronger, more imposing. But here, in his own clothes, he was just Grian, the slightly undersized vet tech who was currently being held hostage by a pair of supervillains.

"Maybe I'm a bit mad," he replied with a shrug, finally managing to scrub the counter clean. "Or maybe I've just seen enough messed-up stuff in this city to be surprised by anything anymore." He tossed the soiled rag into the trash can. "Either way, I'm done playing doctor. So if you don't mind..."

Ringmaster sighed, and under his breath, Grian swore he mumbled something about an odd vet.

“We’re going to head out now, Doctor,” he said, straightening up with a wince. “Get home safely, and try not to call the police, yeah? We’ll know if you do.”

"Get myself in even more trouble? Don't worry, my lip's sealed. I'd rather not end up with her spear through me for good," Grian said, gesturing at Eclipse, who held the weapon loosely but with deadly precision, making it clear she could use it in an instant.

"Oh, he's smart alright," Eclipse giggled, the sound warped by her modulator. "You better keep your word. We might just come poking around... what's your opinion on torture?" She tilted her head to the side, as if she'd asked about the weather.

Grian knew he liked mental torture, loved tormenting their third member Boogeyman especially, but they didn't need to know that.

“Not a fan. Now leave,” he said flatly, exhaustion weighing heavy in his voice.

"Fine, we will take our leave," Eclipse replied, and before Grian could so much as take a step back, she activated her power. It hit so suddenly, his vision didn't just fade to black, but twisted and warped into a dizzying void, like being plunged into endless darkness with no sense of up or down.

The world spun around him, his balance giving out for a moment before his sight finally snapped back after five whole minutes later.

Both villains were gone, vanished without a trace. Grian went into a trance, without really thinking about it, he carefully disposed of everything that might hold DNA evidence, wiping down every surface they'd touched.

That little mistake of letting them go, covering their tracks, wouldn't hit him for another day or *two*.

End Notes

So thankful to my beta readers, Em, Andy, Rue who had been so supportive and had helped me and still are helping me build this story with them fueling my goblin lil brain up

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!